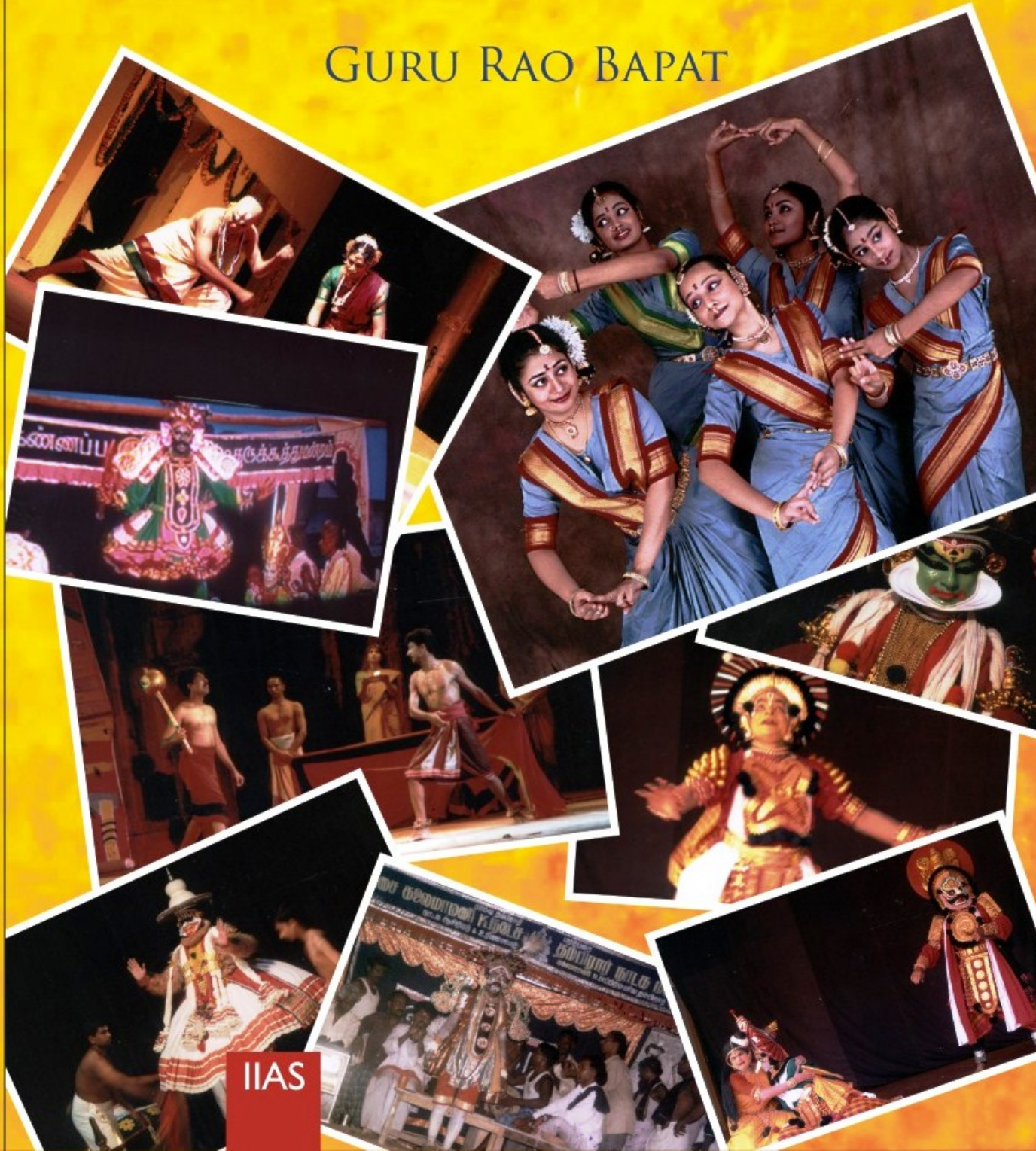


# Re-scribing Tradition

Modernisation of South Indian Dance Drama

GURU RAO BAPAT



This book is about the process of culture-change and the way we make the past meaningful for the present, through a process that is termed here 'Rescribing'.

It studies four traditional dance-drama forms of South India: Yakshagana of Karnataka, Kathakali of Kerala, Terukuttu of Tamil Nadu and Kuchipudi of Andhra. All these are performance genres that have a history of several centuries. All of them have also undergone a deep process of change, in the past-several decades. But each has charted a different course in its process of change. Closely analyzing the changes that have taken place in these forms, over the past several decades the author demonstrates how our conception of tradition becomes a construct. We restructure, recreate the past, in ways that we consider relevant from the stand point of the present. The author locates and studies these changes in the context of not merely aesthetic but also social, political and even economic pressures operating on each form. Different forces have been in operation before and after independence and have played a major part in the deciding the direction of change.

The author has made use of the concept of "rescribing" to analyse the process of change. This gives us a new insight for understanding the traditional forms, and how each form and each society has negotiated with the challenges of modernity.



RE-SCRIBING TRADITION  
*Modernisation of South Indian Dance-Drama*



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*Modernisation of South Indian Dance-Drama*

GURU RAO BAPAT



Indian Institute of Advanced Study  
Rashtrapati Nivas, Shimla

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# CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	ix
1. Introduction	1
2. Yakshagana	25
3. Kathakali	55
4. Terukkuttu	83
5. Kuchipudi	105
6. Conclusion	127
<i>Bibliography</i>	131
<i>Plates</i>	137
<i>Index</i>	147

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## NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

Diacritical marks have not been used for Indian words in this work to facilitate easy reading even for non-experts. For Sanskritic words of some of the South Indian languages, the pan-Indian pronunciations are retained so that nonnative speakers can relate to them easily; for example *Paratam* of Terukkuttu is spelt here as *Bharatam*.





## PREFACE

I have been closely associated with theatrical activities in different capacities as actor, organiser, director etc., in Karnataka. My field of research has been traditional performing arts of Karnataka, particularly Yakshagana. In the present study, I have extended my field of enquiry to different dance-drama forms of South India. Here I have looked at the process of change in the four dance-drama forms of South India. The main focus has been on the process of modernisation of tradition and how these forms have charted different paths in their negotiations with contemporary challenges.

This monograph was written during my tenure as a fellow at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla. I thank the governing body of the Institute and the director, Professor Peter Ronald deSouza for giving me this opportunity. I also wish to thank the other fellows, associates and the staff, who made my stay at Shimla, pleasant and comfortable.

During the course of this study of the dance-drama forms of South India, I visited a number of institutes connected with these forms and interacted with many artists, scholars, etc. All of them have been very helpful and have shared their views with me. I wish to thank the following institutes who allowed me the use of their library and other facilities: National School of Drama, New Delhi; Central Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi; Regional Resource Centre for Folk Performing Arts, Udupi; Kerala Kalamandalam, Cheruthuruthy; Natana Kairali Irinjalakuda; National Folklore Support Centre, Chennai; Koothu Pattarai, Chennai; University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad; and Sri Maya School of Yakshagana, Honnavar.

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## X RE-SCRIBING TRADITION

H.D. Muthukumaraswami, Sri Na Muthuswami, Smt. Vyjayanti Kashi, Dr. Aruna Bhikshu, Prasanna and many others.

I am also thankful to my family and the members of my theatre group who have always stood by me in all my ventures. I hope to continue my study of the different facets of the performing arts particularly of South India in future as well.

GURU RAO BAPAT

## CHAPTER I

# INTRODUCTION

This work is a study of the process of change, transition and transformation that has taken place in the traditional dance-drama forms of South India. The four forms under study here are Yakshagana of Karnataka, Kathakali of Kerala, Terukkuttu of Tamilnadu and Kuchipudi of Andhra. All these are forms that have a history of several centuries, and they have all undergone a radical process of change in the 20th century. Different forces and compulsions have been at work behind this process of change, the most important being the changes taking place in the Indian society. This study is an analysis of how these traditional forms have been engaged in the process of redefining themselves and are negotiating with the challenges of modernity.

The study of change in Indian society has engaged the attention of social scientists. Different facets of change initiated by forces like modernisation and democratisation have been studied. Strangely enough culture change has not drawn as much attention of social scientists as for example changes in social structurations. It is only recently that culture change has emerged as an important area of enquiry in disciplines like Folkloristics, Sociology, Performance studies, Culture studies, etc. In most studies of traditional performing arts, the emphasis has usually been on establishing the antiquity and continuity, which has obscured the changes that have taken place and continue to do so in these forms. Even when a study of change was made, this process was usually conceived of in terms of binaries like tradition and modernity with the assumption that this progression from one to the other was linear and that it entailed a total break from the past, as is pointed out by Appadurai:

Grand western social science (A. Comte, Karl Marx, Max Weber, E. Durkheim) has steadily reinforced the sense of a single moment—call it the modern moment—that by its appearance creates a dramatic and unprecedented break between past

and present. Reincarnated as a break between tradition and modernity and typologised as the difference between ostensibly traditional and modern societies this view has been shown repeatedly to distort the meanings of change and the politics of pastness (1997, 3–4).

Societies like India are traditional and modern at the same time. The problem lies in thinking of them as exclusive categories. Milton Singer who was among the earliest to study the process of modernisation of the traditional Indian society, makes this point explicit. “I was convinced that the dichotomy between ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ ... was not a useful theoretical guide for understanding India. There were just too many cases of coexistence and interaction between the traditional and modern” (1972, 247). The concept of modernisation as one homogeneous experience has also been questioned. Present day scholars are concentrating on the study of how each cultural community, region or nation-state finds its own ways of modernisation. New conceptual categories like ‘alternative modernities’, ‘regional modernities’ etc., are now being posited to understand and analyse this complex process (Knauf, 2002; Shivaramakrishnan and Agrawal, 2003).

Another conceptual error that one often encounters is to equate modernisation with westernisation. The process of modernisation no doubt began with the colonial rule. But to equate modernisation with westernisation would be to look at a partial picture. Yogendra Singh points out how Indian sociologists view the relationship between the two. “A sharp distinction was drawn between modernisation and westernisation, locating this process in the cultural historical individuality of each society and its initial historical conditions, plural traditions, patterns of modernisation” (2000, 27). Along with ideas and institutions borrowed from the west, modernisation has also meant introspection about our own past—weeding out the unwanted growth and retaining what is considered relevant. The entire process has taken different forms in different parts of India. Different social, political, economic and religious compulsions and aspirations as well as historical antecedents have played a key role in giving shape to these changes. Local, national and international forces are at work in this process of modernisation. These forces also determine the way in which we make sense of the past and of tradition.

At the same time, in spite of the problematics involved in the use of categorisations like modern and traditional, we can not reject them outright either, in any discussion of the process of change. In order to locate the

radical process of transformation of Indian society after colonisation, we have to take recourse to conceptual categories like modernisation. Indian society is transforming itself from a largely agrarian rural economy to a free market, consumerist, industrialist, urban economy. The feudal set up of the past has now been replaced by a democratic polity. The rigid caste structure which was the demarcating feature of Hindu society, is also undergoing a process of change. Now the forces of globalisation are also playing a key role in this social transformation. These and related changes can be viewed as modernisation.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly the concept of 'tradition' has also become a contested category. The question of tradition, its various meanings, its relevance for the present, its ideological position in a fast changing world like ours, have all been discussed by scholars from varying ideological positions. Tradition no doubt refers to something that has been handed down to us from the past. In the case of performing arts (as well as in areas like customs, rituals etc.) it passes from one generation to the next mostly in the form of oral transmission. In this process, as with any oral tradition, subtle changes go on taking place. But when we refer to tradition as corpus, we refer to the way we understand the past now, from the perspective of the present. So, our conception of tradition also becomes a construct—how we restructure, recreate the past in ways that we consider relevant from the standpoint of the present.

This does not mean that tradition was a fixed entity even in the past. Specially in the case of performing arts, no living form, however traditional, remains immutable. The form does not have a priori existence independent of the performative context. It takes shape only in the context of performance where the performers, participants and the event all contribute in shaping the form. When the context changes, so does the form itself.

Any cultural form of expression, operates in a social space. These forms remain comparatively stable without major changes when the society where they operate, remains stable. Subtle changes go on taking place in any living tradition, but within the parameters fixed by the tradition itself. But when the society is undergoing a radical process of change, the cultural form also does not remain the same. It gets destabilised. It begins to recodify and redefine itself in response to the sociopolitical changes. (Otherwise the form faces the danger of becoming what in folkloristics is termed a 'frozen' form - a kind of a museum piece.) This kind of redefining may encompass different



aspects of the form - performative context, organisational structure, patronage, target audience, etc. apart from what is really presented on the stage. The grammar of the form may also undergo a change in response to the other changes. Most important of all, changes will also take place in the discourse - the meaning that is generated through the performance. Almost all the traditional performing arts of India have undergone and are undergoing this process of redefining. Different kinds of tensions, and pressures are at work in determining the shape of these changes. Local, national and global agencies are coopting many of these forms for their own ends.

### RE-SCRIBING

This process of change in the traditional performing arts that started in the 20th century as a result of modernisation of Indian society, has been an ongoing process. In response to the sociopolitical changes, these forms have found new ways of negotiating with the challenges posed by modernity. I have named this process “re-scribing tradition”. This refers to the transitions, transformations or even ruptures that may take place in any ongoing tradition, in response to changes taking place in society. This re-scribing may be initiated by an individual or it may be the result of a generally felt need with inputs from several sources. What is important is that tradition does undergo this process of transformation and continues to survive. We can say that ‘re-scribing’ encompasses the entire way in which a traditional form, custom or practice, negotiates with the challenges of modernity and undergoes a process of change.

This concept stands in contrast to ‘invented tradition’, a term coined by Eric Hobsbaum and Terence Ranger. Hobsbaum defines the term as follows:

It includes both ‘traditions’ actually invented constructed and formally instituted and those emerging in a less easily traceable manner within a brief and datable period.

‘Invented tradition’ is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values or norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historical past (1989, 1).

It is clear from the above quotation that the emphasis is on 'invention' and that the term has been used to indicate new practices with an assumed or invented past lineage. This term has often been loosely used even to indicate the process of change in already existing traditions. Apart from being an inaccurate terminology for the processes under study here, a concept like 'invented' may also have unforeseen implications. Nicolas Thomas states how, the notion of 'invention' used by scholars to study the indigenous cultures of Australia and New Zealand, have been used by the media against the natives' claim of ownership of land and other resources. He says, "However unobjectionable these propositions may appear to be in general, they can be construed and have been construed to subvert indigenous claims in settler societies such as New Zealand and Australia" (1999, 265). 'Re-scribing' on the other hand, not merely emphasises on the historicity of tradition, but also points to the ways in which what has been received from the past, is being recoded and redefined now.

## DANCE-DRAMA FORMS OF SOUTH INDIA

This work is a study of this process of re-scribing that has taken place in four traditional dance-drama forms of South India. All these are dance-dramas having a history of several centuries.<sup>2</sup> I have chosen one representative form from each linguistic area (which have also become separate states now). They share many common features (which will be analysed later). Some of them have now been classified as classical and some are considered folk.<sup>3</sup> But all of them focus on the narrative, with *abhinaya* (histrionic representation) being predominant. All these were performed in the open-air with admission being open to all.<sup>4</sup> They have all survived on patronage and popular support, carving out prominent place for themselves in the cultural ethos of these regions.

More important, from the perspective of the present study, all these forms have undergone the process of re-scribing in the last several decades. All four forms have taken different directions of change. These directions have been conditioned by several factors—the threat and challenges faced by the individual forms; the interest taken by the urban elite; the caste configuration of the performers and their position in the caste hierarchy; the role played by the cultural agencies of the state; the inputs of individual artists; now the interest of international agencies, etc. Most important of all, the changing

socio-political situation has played a key role in this process of re-scribing. It was fundamentally as a response to these changes brought about by modernity, that the forms were forced to undergo this process of transformation.

But until recently, this process of change specially in the performing arts, has never received scholarly attention. These forms were supposed to represent 'tradition', which was presumed to be immutable. For example, even though radical changes had taken place in Indian dance, in terms of the performative context, the composition of the performers, the patronage etc.,<sup>5</sup> Krishna Chaitanya writing in 1980s states, "Indian dance remains content to be shackled to the past in technique, phrasing and form" (1987, 4). In a recent book which studies the process in which the 'classical' arts of South India, Bharatanatyam and Karnataka music were reinvented in the 20th century, Indira V. Peterson and Devesh Soneji point out the lacuna in the study of the performing arts. "In the second half of the twentieth century, and now in the twenty-first, dance, and music continue to be defined in terms of 'traditional' and 'modern'. Yet the performing arts have not been systematically studied nor their place in the history of modernity in South Asia been documented and critically analysed on the broad scale". They further add how in the making of these traditional performing arts in the contemporary context, "orientalism, colonialism, nationalism and globalisation come together in various permutations... impelled by a wide range of causes, contexts and agents" (2008, 1-3).

It is only of late that this process of change in the traditional forms and the construction of the concept of tradition itself, have begun to be interrogated and studied. With reference to the forms under study here, the works of Philip Zarelli (2000), Hanne de Bruin (2003), Aruna Bhikshu (2006), Swapna Sundari (2005) Guru Rao Bapat (1998) are some of the recent works that have analysed different facts of change. A recent book *Performing Pasts* (2008) on the process of change in the 'classical' arts of Tamil Nadu Bharata Natyam and Karnataka music, analyses how these forms became 'classicalised' through the intervention of Brahminical urban elites of Madras, and how in this process, the traditional performing castes became disenfranchised.

## THE COMMON FEATURES OF THE FORMS UNDER STUDY

As was hinted at earlier, the four forms under study here, as well as many

other genres of performing arts of South India, share many common features. These similarities can be found in different aspects of performance like theme, costume, dance, theatrical qualities, etc. At a more fundamental level, the position and function of these dance-drama forms as rituals connected with local temples and festivals seem to point to a common tradition shared by all the dance-drama forms of South India. Performance was a participatory event in which the entire community took part. This ensured a continuity of the tradition as well as a respectable place for the performing art in the religious/cultural ethos of the society.

The commonalities shared by the various traditional theatre forms of South India have prompted some scholars in putting forth the argument about the possible existence of a proto Dravidian theatre form. The many theatre forms that are in existence now, would then be oicotypes of that 'proto' form. Basavaraja Malashetty for example, says:

A comparison of *Yakshagana*, *Yakshandola* and *Yekkalagana* in the Karnataka area with the forms of folk theatre in the neighbouring states as in the *Yakshaganamu* or *Vidhinatakam* of Andhra Pradesh, *Kathakali* and *Ramanattam* of Kerala, *Kanian Kuttu* and *Terukkuttu* of Tamil Nadu, leads to the conclusion that in ancient South India, there must have existed a type of proto folk-play with music and dance (1991, 407).

Without going into the merits or otherwise of the 'proto' theory, we can safely say that it points to many of the common features shared by the dance-drama forms of South India.<sup>7</sup> Let us now have a look at some of the common features shared by these forms.

## THE INFLUENCE OF BHAKTI MOVEMENT

The Bhakti movement was a pan Indian movement that swept the entire country during the 13th to 17th centuries. It was a radical reinterpretation of Hinduism laying emphasis on devotion and total surrender to God as the pathway to salvation. This shift from knowledge to devotion—Bhakti—as the true path, opened the way for the participation of people of all castes and classes in this religious resurgence. This movement was spread to all parts of India by the saints belonging to different denominations of Hinduism. Adya Rangacharya, a leading Kannada dramatist says, "The whole of the Indian subcontinent from Basaveshwara in the South to Kabir in the North, became

suffused with saints and their songs and religious discourses. It is not a mere coincidence that in the period of these four or five centuries, every linguistic region of South India, saw a galaxy of saints" (1977, 74). In order to reach out to the large populace, these saints used the local language as opposed to Sanskrit.

The Bhakti movement, on the surface was a religious movement, but it was also a great agent of social change. It opposed the rigid hierarchical structure of society along caste lines, where all knowledge was confined to the hands of the Brahmins. This movement opposed the concept of stratification of society along caste lines and people belonging to all castes and classes participated in this religious resurgence. It is thus not surprising to find that the saints and poets of this movement belong to all castes and groups. In this way, the Bhakti movement was also a movement for social equality.<sup>8</sup>

When the saints of the Bhakti movement wanted to spread the new religious message among the masses, they made use of the spoken language of the people; and what better mode of reaching the people than through the performing arts. So, the existing form of performance of each region was reinvigorated, changed and adapted to the new need. The performing arts also received a legitimacy and an assured space in the cultural ethos, as they became part of the religious worship. Thus the ritualistic aspect of these dance-dramas became pronounced. The savants took the existing genres of performance and gave them a new orientation and purpose. Thus each area and each folk theatre form, though influenced by the Bhakti movement, chose those elements that best suited its genius and the needs and aspirations of the people. Thus if in forms like Raslila or Manipuri, the emphasis fell on the depiction of Bhakti (devotion) and *Shringara* (erotic), in South Indian forms like Yakshagana and Kathakali, it was largely on *Vira* (heroic) and *Raudra* (furious) emotions.

The changes that came about in these performing arts because of their contact with the Bhakti movement, were for reaching indeed, as is explained by Adya Rangacharya:

The most important benefit for folk theatre because of its contact with Bhakti movement, was that it acquired a place in the social life of the people. The moment the stage came out of the precincts of the temple, to the streets and squares, it became a kind of religious performance. The stories were provided by the Gods

of the saints, not merely Rama and Krishna. More than the themes, the event of performance itself became important... In an indirect way, it was considered as a ceremony for offering homage to some indistinct deity—the village goddess, the rain god or the earth goddess. What is important here is that the dramatic performance itself became a ritual worship (1997, 104–105).

All the four forms under study here, share this strong ritualistic framework. If the origin of Kuchipudi is associated with Siddhendra Yogi, Yakshagana is closely linked to Udupi, the great centre of Krishna worship in Karnataka. Kathakali in its earlier version was known as Ramanattam, the play about Rama's life. In the case of Terukkuttu, its interactions with Bhakti movement, have not been recorded, though it continues to be highly ritualistic. All these forms have also been traditionally associated with temples and depict the episodes from the pan Indian epics and *Puranas*. It is also clear that certain aspects of Sanskrit dramaturgy have been inculcated into all these forms, a process that must have taken place under the influence of the Bhakti movement. The ritualistic element is quite pronounced in these forms and they stand in opposition to secular forms like Nautanki or Tamasha of other parts of India.

Let us now have a look at some of the other common features shared by these forms.

## OPEN-AIR PERFORMANCE

The performance space of all these forms was always in an open space like the open courtyard of the temple, the village square or even the agricultural field after the harvest was over. The performances were open to the entire community (though it may have been sponsored by one person). Thus they stand in antithetical opposition to the courtly arts which were always performed for the select few, usually in an enclosed performative space.

In fact, the entire gamut of performing arts of India can be divided into two groups basing this division on the performative space—those forms that are performed indoors and those that are performed in the open-air. The courtly arts and those that were performed within the precincts of the temple, belong to the first category. They are exclusive and open to only a select few, which is typical of courtly, elitist culture. The open-air performances on the other hand are always held in the open with no restriction on who can witness



and participate in the performance. Conceptually also, the spatial convention of an unenclosed open-air performance stands for a world view that is inclusive and expansive unlike the enclosed atmosphere which is exclusive and constrictive, with the intention of keeping out the large majority.

All the four forms under study here belong to the category of public space with the performance being open to the entire community. In the nomenclature of some of these forms also, this mindset is made explicit. For example, until the recent past, Yakshagana was known as *bayalata* (open-air, field performance).<sup>9</sup> Terukkuttu literally means performance in the street. This shows how the conception of the public, open-air performative space is fundamental to all these forms.

### THE ROLE OF MUSIC

The forms under study here, being dance-dramas, music acts as the binding force controlling the entire progression of performance. The primacy of music in these forms can be understood in proper perspective, if we compare them with classical Sanskrit drama, where the songs form only a substructure, whereas the main progression of the narrative takes place through dialogues. On the other hand, in these forms, the entire progression of the narrative and the performance is controlled by the songs sung by the singer. The singing is assigned to specialist singers. The actor's task is to emotively express the 'content' of the song through acting, though in some forms, the actors used to sing in the past. Some forms like Kathakali do not have dialogues at all. This shows the pivotal role of music in the dance-drama traditions of South India. This predominant role of music also necessitates the presence of singers and instrumentalists on the stage, throughout the performance. The actors some times also sing intoning with the singer/s. If some forms have dialogues others do not have dialogues.

### THE PROMINENCE OF DANCE

These forms being dance-dramas, dance plays a predominant role in performance. The actor enacts through dance to the song being sung. Even in forms that have dialogue, dance is the primary means of enacting and creating a character. In fact dance and concomitant communicative modes

like gestures, *mudras*, rhythmic body postures, etc., play a prominent role in the histrionic representation of the character.

## THE USE OF THE HAND-HELD CURTAIN

The traditional curtain held by two stage hands is a prominent feature of all these forms. The first appearance of a character is always from behind this curtain. It is important to note that this theatrical device becomes a highly charged sign with great significance. It divides the quotidian world of the spectators from the epic world created on the stage. The actor exposes himself from behind the curtain in phases until the curtain is discarded and the entire persona of the character revealed.

Intimately related to the use of this curtain, is the importance attached to the first appearance of the main characters. Most of these forms, have a definite typology into which the characters are divided. The costume and make-up of the actors indicate the character type. The actor is supposed to establish the essential quality of the character in the first appearance itself. The traditional curtain is often used as an effective device for the exposition of the character. This becomes possible because of the shared knowledge between the performers and spectators regarding the narrative and the character being represented.

This theatrical device also provides a profound insight into the approach to acting and character representation in these forms. In the process of emerging from behind the curtain, the actor also 'becomes' the character. No doubt, this process of the actor converting himself into the character, begins with the elaborate make-up. (In forms like Yakshagana and Terukkuttu each actor does his own make-up). But the complete transformation of the actor into the character he is representing, takes place on the stage itself and becomes part of the performance. In Terukkuttu for example, the actor begins by referring to the character he is representing in third person and only later begins using the first person when he has 'become' the character. This entire process demonstrates how these forms conceptually project the actor as a sign representing the character and this is made clear to the spectators as well, through the elaborate play with the hand-held curtain. This approach to character representation stands in opposition to the realistic or naturalistic method of acting of modern theatre.

EMPHASIS ON *VIRA* AND *RAUDRA* EMOTIONS

The themes depicted in these forms are drawn from the epics and *puranas*. But one feature that is unique to many of these forms, is the predominance of themes dealing with battles and the depiction of *vira* and *raudra* (valorous and furious) emotions.<sup>10</sup> The dance steps and body movements of these forms are also brisk, fast and 'rough'. They lay emphasis on *tandava* (the furious; supposed to have been derived from Shiva's furious dance of destruction) than on *lasya* (the graceful; supposed to have been derived from Shiva's consort Parvati). No doubt there are scenes and episodes in all the forms, where delicate emotions like *Sringara* (erotic), *Karuna* are depicted, but by and large the emphasis is on the emotions mentioned above.

The emphasis on the heroic and the furious emotions may in part be due to the fact that all these forms are performed only by men. They may also be related to the changes taking place in the feudal structure, when these traditional values, needed to be upheld and projected. Philip Zarelli, in his study of Kathakali, explains how the position of the kings and warriors was threatened when the colonial forces became well entrenched in Kerala around 17th century. He concludes that the honour and morale of the martial caste (Nairs) was displaced from the field of battle and captured on the stage (1984, 51).

On the other hand, David Shulman in his analysis of Tamil myths, sees battle as a metaphor of the clash between forces of order and disorder. In the battle, ultimately, disorder (usually represented by the demonic forces) is ritualistically slain and order restored. Evil and disorder are a part of man's life as a whole and though defeated in the end, they are ritualistically and symbolically incorporated into the experience of man. So, the disorder of battle becomes a basic metaphor for all life and the victory over it is a triumph of forces of virtue and purity (1986, 124).

One can only say that the predominance of *vira* and *raudra* emotions in South Indian forms, needs a more thorough analysis, situating it in the philosophical, social and political exegeses of the period when these forms emerged and of the present form. It can also be related to gender issues as these are usually considered 'manly' emotions.

## PERFORMED ONLY BY MEN

One important feature that distinguishes these dance-dramas from the performing arts of the *devadasis* and courtesans (which also existed in the same geographical area), is the total ban on women from taking part in these performances. Female roles are also played by men. This is largely true of these forms even today except for Kuchipudi, which has rescribed itself into a solo form, where women have begun performing in large numbers. This opposition of these forms to the courtly arts can be related to the other opposition of 'indoor-outdoor' performance spaces referred to earlier.

It is difficult to explain why these forms have remained an all male domain. Now some women are learning these forms and are performing, but such efforts have only remained at the level of experimentation and even to this day, women are not seen performing in these forms on a regular basis. Is it because these are ritualistic forms? Were women thought to be unfit (improper) to perform in the public domain as these forms belonged to the realm of public culture? Along the west coast (the geographical area of Kathakali and Yakshagana) the matrilineal social structure prevailed and some scholars have argued that these all male performing genres were utilised for the assertion of the male ethos (Manjushri Sircar, 1982; Bapat, 1998). One can only say that this is an area that needs much greater study for firm conclusions to be drawn.

The above mentioned are some of the common features found in all the four forms. Other similarities in themes, costumes, performative structure, etc. have not been touched upon here.

These forms also have fundamental differences. They are performed in the four different languages of South India. Each one has been shaped by the historical antecedents, the cultural ethos and the sociopolitical situations of those regions. They have also grown and developed drawing upon the different performing traditions that existed in those areas. The performing castes of these forms are also different. Kuchipudi was performed only by Brahmin men; Kathakali performers consisted mostly of Nairs, the martial caste of Kerala, with creative inputs from Nambudiri Brahmins; Terukkuttu was performed only by the non Brahminical castes, that were placed much lower in the social hierarchy; Yakshagana was performed both by Brahmins and non-Brahminical castes. If forms like Kathakali received royal patronage,

Yakshagana and Terukkuttu survived only in the villages with support and patronage from the rural community. Each of these forms developed in their own unique ways, fulfilling the artistic, cultural, ritualistic urge of the communities where they operated.

#### PERIOD OF DESTABILISATION

All these forms, had an assured cultural space in society because of their ritualistic framework and the support they received through patronage as well as participation. This state of affairs continued until the first few decades of 20th century. Rapid changes brought about by colonial rule and modernisation began to change the society. The feudal system also began to lose its hold over society at large. Many people who were exposed to English education, began to look at the traditional forms with contempt as remnants of the dark past. These social changes also led to the loss of patronage for many of these forms as they were linked to feudal patronage. They became destabilised and had to find new means of survival. This is also true of many other cultural practices all over India, as is pointed out by Yogendra Singh. “Many traditional fairs, festivals, folk cultural celebrations, which were linked with feudal patronage, had to undergo new institutional anchorage. In this process of transition, several cultural practices, organically linked with past institutions, were lost” (2000,19). So, most of the performing arts that depended on such patronage, were forced to search for alternate modes of survival.

Another change brought about by modernisation was a marked reduction in the ritualistic appeal. As observed earlier, most of the forms under study here, had a strong ritualistic framework which had provided them a firm base. They were also intimately connected with temples. As a result of the shift away from ritualism, they were now in danger of losing their *raison d’être*, unless they were able to redefine themselves. Commenting on such a movement away from ritualism and towards secularisation in different aspects of Indian life, Milton Singer, observes how the trend has been, “to shift attention and activity away from ritual observances and sacred learning and to fields of popular culture and the arts. This change carries with it a shift in values from those predominantly connected with religious merit to those of mass entertainment and aesthetics” (1972, 187).

As a result of these and related changes in the Indian society, these forms, like many other genres of performing arts all over India, faced a grave crisis. Their existence itself was at stake. New forms of patronage had to be found and a new relevance had to be sought for, because of the decreasing ritualistic appeal. So, in many of these forms we can observe a movement from the ritualistic space to the secular, aesthetic space in their process of rescribing.

## REVIVALISM

The end of nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth century, witnessed a great resurgence in the entire country, in the form of the freedom movement and fight against the colonial rule. This was also the period when there began a search for a 'national culture' as a counter to the colonial discourse. Cultural values were thought of as an integral part of creating a national identity. Many educated elites began to take a keen interest in the multifarious traditional performing arts of India and thus began the phase of revivalism.

But in the exuberance of revivalism, many of these forms were presumed to be in a state of decay, having become impure and having lost their original 'pristine' qualities. So, efforts were started towards a process of recovering and preserving these presumed pristine qualities of the traditional forms. This attempt of 'purifying' the tradition by the revivalists was also a process of modernisation. As we have observed, many of the forms were facing a period of crisis. Through this process of revival and retrieval, the project was to create the concept of a national culture relating it to antiquity and hoary past. In South India the educated elites of Madras and the journal *Triveni* which was described as the journal of Indian renaissance, took a lead role in this process of revivalism.<sup>11</sup> Eminent personalities like V. Raghavan and Rukmini Devi Arundel for example, took a lead role in rescribing *Sadir* dance into Bharatanatyam. A similar process but in a totally different direction (of providing institutional support) was started by the Malayalam poet Vallathol and his friends to save Kathakali. Such a trend of revivalism started in different parts of India, with regard to traditional forms like Manipuri, Kathak, etc. This process of revivalism and the urge to project the new construct of national culture, we should keep in mind, was itself a result of and a reaction to modernisation which involved changing the form from the received form.



This process of revivalism, with the mindset of retrieval of past glory, had some unforeseen consequences as well. In the attempt to relate to the distant past, the links that these forms had, with the society where they had survived, were sought to be erased. As a result, they were projected as pure aesthetic forms cut off from the everyday concerns of the participants. This mindset, to look upon traditional art forms as epiphenomenon, continues even to this day. Rajika Puri, commenting on such an attitude, says, “We continue to treat dance as an epiphenomenon, as something that exists apart from our social, political, economic and philosophical selves. We have created a charm between our everyday concerns and those that are expressed in these art forms” (1983, 22-23). Another consequence of revivalism was to consider these forms as immutable—to project them as having remained unchanged throughout their existence, possibly from Bharata to the present. In trying to relate to the projected past, what was not perceived or highlighted was that the revivalists were also changing and redefining these forms according to their own perspective.

Another fallout of this process of revivalism was the prioritisation of certain forms and the marginalisation of others. Those forms that had received the support of educated urban elites and middle class, assumed the status of classical forms and were projected as representing ‘national culture’, while many others were relegated as regional and folk forms. Many of the performing arts of India have traditionally been associated with particular castes.<sup>12</sup> One of the consequences of revivalism was that in some of the forms that attained classical status, the hereditary artists were cut off from the prestige and social status that accrued to these forms, as is pointed out by Indira Peterson:

Recent scholarship has shown that Bharatanatyam dance and Karnataka music were invented in the twentieth century as South Indian classical traditions primarily by Brahmin elites of Madras city, as part of a middle class nationalist project of cultural identity building, and that this project entailed the marginalisation and disenfranchisement of hereditary artists and their performance traditions (2008, 253).

## POST-INDEPENDENCE SCENARIO

This mindset of revivalism continued in the initial years after independence.

This was now perceived as part of the project of nation building. New governmental institutions at the state and national level were created to provide support and patronage to the performing arts. The feudal patronage of the past, was now sought to be replaced by the nation-state representing the people of India. Central Sangeet Natak Akademi for example, was a national institution that assumed the position of new patron of the traditional arts through its awards and funding. In the first national seminar on dance (March 1958) four forms— Bharatanatyam, Kathakali, Kathak and Manipuri were recognised as classical forms. Thus the Akademi also became the authority on deciding the status of the multifarious forms of India.

Apart from the governmental agencies, new institutions like Kerala Kalamandalam, Kalakshetra etc., were also started by the artists or enlightened persons for the teaching and preservation of various traditions. These institutions led to a new kind of intervention in the teaching of these forms. The old *Guru–Shishya parampara* (teacher–pupil tradition of transmission) was now replaced by modern institutions.

## IDENTITY POLITICS

After independence, changes began taking place in the Indian society and polity. The society began changing from an agrarian rural economy to an urbanised market driven, consumerist economy; from a feudal rule to a democratic setup. The euphoria of national oneness began waning and each caste, class, linguistic and regional group began to assert its identity. As a result of these and related changes, the abstract notion of ‘national culture’ that was projected in the preindependence days, also came under challenge. The performing arts naturally were also affected and many a time, became sites of contestation where these new aspirations got expressed. To take but one example, in the first national dance seminar of 1958, when Kuchipudi was not accorded recognition as classical dance, it was taken as an affront to Andhra pride. Andhra state had been carved out of Madras presidency a few years back, and Andhraites were in the process of assertion of their own identity against the domination (including cultural domination) of Tamils. This incident kindled the process of resurgence and revivalism of Kuchipudi within Andhra. Swapna Sundari makes this change in perspective clear. “From this point of time, dance and music forms began to be categorised as

‘belonging to’ a particular language-group and thereby to one state or the other” (2005, 14).

Similarly these forms under study here, have become territories where conflicting ideologies and identity politics of caste and class configurations are being played out. In Kathakali for example, if one group (Margi), tries to maintain the perceived tradition of leisurely exposition and a non-worldly ambience, Marxists, on the other hand, are trying to convert this form into a people’s theatre. Terukkuttu has now become a site of conflicting claims over the form and the meanings it generates (including the ritualistic appeal) between the Vannars (traditional performers) and Vanniars (traditional patrons). In Yakshagana, there are unexpressed tensions between the commercial troupes and the traditionally organised troupes that specialise in ritualistic performances; between the Brahminical and non-Brahminical forces that are trying to appropriate the form as well as the meanings generated through it. These are only some of the examples of tensions and aspirations which are conditioning the ways in which these forms are being rescribed now.

This study focuses attention on these social, political, religious and also aesthetic compulsions behind the process of rescribing that is taking place in the four forms. It is clear that even traditional forms do not exist in an antiseptic vacuum, cut off from all these concerns of the society where all the participants—artists, spectators, patrons, etc.—exist. As Ralph Yarrow says, “If theatre anywhere is relevant to the context it inhabits, it needs to be able to dialogue with it, not retire from it” (2001, 29). Even traditional forms have always been in dialogue with the social exegeses throughout their history. It was only in the period of revivalism that we enshrined these forms as representing antiquity and the hoary past, cutting them off from the everyday concerns of all those connected with these artistic modes of expression. Now with conflicting claims of different groups who are also using the traditional performing arts for the assertion of their identities and ideologies, the performing arts and rituals have become conflicting sites expressive of these concerns. Wayne Ashley, in his study of Teyyam of Kerala, points out how, “differently positioned groups with competing political and social goals construct, remember and dismantle the past or images of the past in order to shape both the present and the future” (1993, 23). As a result of such re-scribing, these forms, like other traditional forms in different parts of India,

have begun to project these and other 'new meanings' for which they were never originally intended. The question of change in the four forms under study here, has been analysed in the light of all these issues.

## ERA OF GLOBALIZATION

The contemporary changes taking place in the society like globalisation, economic liberalisation, communication revolution, spread of the media, etc. have impacted the performing arts as well. These forces or the reactions to them are playing a major role in the process of rescribing that is going on in these forms now. A few of these can be mentioned here to indicate the direction of change in the contemporary scenario.

One important impact of the forces of globalisation, it has often been pointed out, is a movement towards homogenisation. From the international scene to the local, every aspect of our life including culture, is undergoing this process of homogenisation. This process is in operation at the regional level as well, where local individualities are merging into one another. All the forms under study here had developed several styles within the same tradition. Now with greater interaction, better transport facilities, new institutions where these forms are taught etc., there has been a merging of styles leading to a certain uniformity. This trend of homogenisation can be witnessed in all the four forms, as well as in most of the other performing arts of India.

But this trend can also arouse a reaction in the opposite direction. When any group or region feels that its unique identity is being threatened, it will try to protect these presumed unique features which then become the markers of such identity. These twin oppositional forces are in operation at the same time, in India and perhaps in the rest of the world too, many a time leading to conflict, points out Kapila Vatsayan:

It would appear that just at the moment of the shrinking of all differences into a single homogenised village without differentiation, there is an outburst of intolerance and violence with each other. Most parts of the world appear to have been affected by this twin phenomenon of coming together and falling apart (quoted in Geeti Sen, 2003, 95).

One impact of this phenomenon has been a sharp rise in the mindset of identity politics. Each caste, region, linguistic group tries to assert its identity

against the forces of homogenisation. In this process, performing arts, if they are traditionally related to these groups, will also be used for the purpose of identity assertion. A direct fallout of this urge can be seen now in the rise of ritualism. We observed earlier how with modernisation, there came about a sharp decline in the ritualistic appeal, which affected the existence of many of these forms. But with the rise of identity politics, ritualistic theatre forms that are associated with particular groups, are also witnessing a period of resurgence<sup>13</sup>. This can be seen for example, in the rising number of ritualistic performances of Yakshagana and Terukuttu. These recent developments are also conditioning the contemporary process of rescribing of these forms.

#### WESTERN INTEREST AND ITS IMPACT

One of the most important developments in the world of theatre in the last half a century, has been the way theatre practitioners of the West have turned towards India. From Jerzy Grotowsky and Eugene Barba to Richard Schechner and Peter Brook, many influential theorists and practitioners of modern Western theatre, “have turned to India, to look for some thing they felt was missing... whether that lack is understood as psychospiritual, technical, aesthetic or a combination of them all” (Ralph Yarrow, 2001, 16). This interest of the West in Indian theatre, particularly in some of the traditional forms has been so well recorded that as Ananda Lal puts it, “no analysis of contemporary Indian theatre can afford to ignore the profound Indian influence on world theatre”<sup>13</sup> (quoted in Ralph Yarrow, 2001, 27).

Several reasons have been adduced to account for the Western interest in these forms. Some of these reasons are mentioned by Yarrow in the above-mentioned quotation. This interest has also been analysed from other perspectives: Is it a fascination for the exotic, as a remnant of the past which the West has now lost? Is it a continuation of Orientalism or an example of neocolonialism?

Some of the scholars Indian theatre like Rustom Bharucha (1990, 2000) and A. Lal (1995, 2004) have been severe critics of Western (mis)representation of Indian theatre. They strongly object to Western experiments of interculturism where elements are taken from different performance traditions from different parts of the world as inputs in creating a new synthetic product. They argue that this syncretic approach, reduces

these forms into mere 'technique', cutting them off from the living relationship with the historical, social situations. Such an attitude is seen by them as another kind of marginalisation, resulting in a new kind of Orientalism, this time inspired by the forces of globalisation. Their critique mainly focusses on how the West perceives and utilises Indian theatre or elements of it.

Valid as these comments are, they focus attention on only one side of this phenomenon, on West's utilisation of Indian theatre. Another question of equal importance and perhaps greater immediacy for us as Indians needs to be posited: has the Western interest in some of the traditional forms, affected the forms themselves? How have forms like Kudiattam and Kathakali - the two Indian forms that have attracted the maximum Western attention - been affected by this fascination of the West? Has it affected the artists' own perception of the form? To what extent are they impelled to satisfy the 'expectations' of the target audience when they perform before Western audiences or as part of cultural tourism packages? Are these tensions conditioning the way in which these forms negotiate with tradition? Questions such as the above need to be posited and answers found, to understand the impact of globalisation in its complete perspective. I have tried to look at some of these ramifications in my study, specially of Kathakali. With the spread of globalisation and the growing international exposure of traditional forms, questions such as the above are going to become paramount in understanding the contemporary cultural scene.

In the light of all the issues outlined above, this study focusses attention on four dance-drama forms of South India. Though they share many common features, they have charted different directions in their process of re-scribing. The social cultural conditions where each form operated being different, the challenges they faced were also different. The genius of each form as well as of all those involved in the process of re-scribing, have led them in different paths. Kuchipudi transformed itself from a dance-drama performed by Brahmin men in a small village to a solo dance, performed by women in urban, metropolitan centres. Kathakali that was performed by Nair men, with inputs by Nambudiri Brahmins and was patronised by the royalty and feudal forces in different parts of Kerala, has now attracted national and international attention, with institutional support from governmental and non governmental agencies. Yakshagana that was basically a ritualistic



performance, linked to temples, has now become a commercial enterprise, competing with other forms of mass entertainment. Terukkuttu, which was a performance cycle of the *Mahabharata*, with charged ritualistic participation of the entire village, is now also moving into secular space and getting prominent coverage in some television channels.

These are only some of the ways in which all these traditional forms are undergoing a deep process of re-scribing and are modernising themselves. By studying this process of change, we can understand the culture making processes at work in Indian society and the contending ideologies that are conditioning this process of change. The process of re-scribing demonstrates how in the Indian context, tradition is not something buried in the past, but a potent presence with which we negotiate to shape our present and future. We can end this chapter, with the comment of Homi Bhabha, who points out how, such negotiation with the past, is a matter of necessity and how the re-scribing of the past can also become an act of insurgency:

The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with 'newness', that is not part of the continuum of past or present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The 'past-present' becomes part of the necessity not the nostalgia of living (1994,7).

## NOTES

1. Dipankar Gupta equates modernity with respect for the individual and is highly critical of these categorisations. In his book *Mistaken Modernity* (2000), he argues that Indian society is far from real modernity and that these categories only obfuscate the reality.
2. One remarkable feature of most of the traditional performing arts (including dance-dramas) of India is that most of them (in their present form) have emerged over a period of two hundred years—between 15th and 17th centuries. From Ankia Nat in Assam to Kathakali in Kerala, from Bhavai in Gujarat to Jatra in Orissa and Bengal, almost all these forms, including the four forms under study here, have evolved during this period. The Bhakti movement played a major role in the efflorescence of the multifarious forms in different languages across the length and breadth of India. But no scholarly analysis has been made as to why so many performing genres sprang up in different parts of India around the

same time. Kapila Vatsayan lists the different forms of India and their approximate date of origin. See Vatsayan (1980) Appendix II.

3. This classification is itself a recent phenomenon and a host of compulsions from the caste identities of the performers to the urban elite that support and patronise these forms, play a crucial role in determining the status—classical or otherwise—of these forms. This has been analysed in greater detail in the chapters on Yakshagana and Kuchipudi. Also see Matthew Allen (2008) on the classicalisation of certain forms and the role played by an elitist organisation like the Music Academy of Madras in this process.
4. The implications of the open-air performance and its conceptual opposition to the courtly, elitist arts, which were performed indoors in an enclosed private space, is discussed later in this chapter.
5. Such a faulty perception comes about because we often assume that the total meaning of any performance, is generated from what is performed on the stage. Changes in the performative context, the composition of the participants (artists, spectators, patrons etc.) also alter the ‘meanings’ communicated by the art form.
6. For more details on the first Sangeet Natak Academy seminar on Dance and how certain forms were accorded ‘classical’ status, see ch. 5. on Kuchipudi.
7. The argument of a ‘proto’ form suffers from many weaknesses. The evidences available for such conclusions about past history are too scanty. Even at the synchronic level, no comprehensive comparative study of these forms has been attempted. What we can definitely say is that there has been a great deal of interaction between these forms.
8. A.K. Ramanujan, in his comments on the Bhakti movement, explains how the Bhakti movement rejected the idea of structuration of society itself. He calls such a structure, “anti-‘structure’, the ideological rejection of the ideal of structure itself” (1973, 35).
9. In fact, the first book on Yakshagana, written by Shivarama Karanth in Kannada, is entitled *Yakshagana Bayalata* (1958).
10. Kuchipudi seems to be an exception to this, where emotions like *Bhakti* (devotion) and *Shringara* (erotic) predominate. But in the Yakshaganas presented in Kuchipudi, *Vira* and *Raudra* emotions are also projected.
11. The journal *Triveni* was founded in 1928. The first article on *Sadir nach* by K.V. Ramachandran was published in 1935. Milton Singer commenting on this journal’s contribution to the process of modernisation says, “This journal... became a major organ of the cultural revival in the South” (1972, 173).
12. As has been commented upon earlier, ‘classical’ status accorded to certain forms, is also linked to the caste identities of performers. Forms associated with ‘backward’ castes, are usually classified as ‘folk’ and are rarely accorded classical status. This goes to show how the modern project of classicalisation is intimately

linked to social structuration as well and not merely to the intrinsic quality of the form as is usually assumed.

13. The rise of ritualism and its use for identity assertion of particular caste groups, is not restricted to the performing arts. Many rituals and temples associated with particular caste groups are now undergoing this process of resurgence. This process is more pronounced in the case of non-Brahminical caste groups, in which we can recognise a social, religious movement that is in opposition to what M.N. Srinivas has termed Sanskritisation.

## CHAPTER 2

# YAKSHAGANA

### BACKGROUND

Yakshagana is the traditional dance drama performing art of Karnataka. Yakshagana literally means the song of the *Yakshas*, who are ‘a class of semi divine beings, attendants of Kubera’ (Monier Williams, 1899, 838). The traditional theatre of the whole of Karnataka is called Yakshagana, though the term is commonly used now to designate the form of dance-drama that is prevalent in the three coastal districts and the adjoining areas of the western coast of Karnataka. This is probably because of the greater exposure this version has received at the national and international level and also perhaps because of the greater sophistication that it has achieved in its expressiveness. The form prevalent in the rest of Karnataka is known by the name *mudalapaya* (eastern style).

Yakshagana has a history of at least five hundred years. Though there are references to earlier forms, like *Yekkalagana* (*Candraprabha Purana*, 12<sup>th</sup> C., A.D.), they have not survived. Some scholars like Krishna Bhat Artikaje argue that Yakshagana was originally a style of music and referred to a mode of worship in temples (1991, 407).

In its present form, it is an all night performance beginning with the preliminaries (referred to as *Purvaranga* in *Natya Shastra*) and ending with a *mangala* (auspicious ending). In between, certain episodes from the Indian epics or *Puranas* are enacted. The written text (called *prasanga*- lit. episode) comprises of a series of songs set to different *ragas* and *talas*. They are sung by the musician (*bhagavata*) and accompanied by two percussion instruments *maddale* (a mridangam like instrument) and *chande* (a vertical drum, beaten with sticks). The actors, wearing gorgeous costumes, dance and emotively

enact the 'content' of the song. After the song-dance sequence, they expand on the content of the song through their improvised dialogue. Dialogues in Yakshagana are not written down and do not form part of the written text. These are improvised and created during the performance by the actors. They are guided by the oral tradition no doubt, though the actor has great freedom to change it. This is one of the unique features of Yakshagana.

Traditionally Yakshagana troupes were organised in the name of temples, though the temple did not administer them directly. The performance was sponsored by one person, or a group of persons but it was open to everyone and was always performed in open air. The patrons no doubt belonged to the upper echelons of society, usually land lords, but the shows were open to one and all. These sponsored performances are called *harake-ata* (vow performance). People take a vow that they would sponsor a show on fulfilment of a particular wish, like child birth, marriage, etc. The performers are always men; even female roles are performed by men and this custom continues even today.

Yakshagana has had a strong ritualistic framework and content. The performance is always presumed to be in the service of a deity and sponsoring a show is considered sacred act. The framework of the entire performance begins with the worship on the stage and comes to an end with the auspicious waving of the flame (*arati*) on the stage and in the make-up room. The themes being from the epics and *Puranas*, they also highlight the ritualistic content. Most of the episodes uphold the traditional value system, with the victory of *dharma* over *adharma*. Even taking part in the performance was considered a sacred act. This was the way Yakshagana was organised and performed until the 1950s when rapid changes began taking place in almost all aspects of this art form like the context of performance, organisation, new texts, reinterpretation of old texts, performances in Tulu language, etc. All these changes have radically altered the present form of Yakshagana.

## PROCESS OF CHANGE

What has been described earlier was the manner in which Yakshagana functioned for centuries until 1950s when radical changes began taking place. This does not mean that earlier the form was totally static or 'frozen'. Changes have always been taking place, but they were not perceived as a break from tradition.

But the changes that came about in the second half of 20<sup>th</sup> century have affected all aspects of this form. Fundamental changes have taken place in the organisational structure with the emergence of commercial ‘tent’ troupes. The performative context itself underwent a radical change causing a rupture in the traditional ritualistic performative context. Many new scripts (*prasanga*) came to be written that were not based on the epics and *puranas* and many traditional *prasangas* were reinterpreted in a radically new light.

Modern technological amenities have also influenced Yakshagana. For example, when sound amplification system was introduced, it brought about a complete change in Yakshagana music. The high pitched singing that was the unique feature of this open-air form, gave way to the using of lower scales. (Kalinga Navuda the renowned *bhagavata*, became the first singer to use the entire range of musical notes). Similarly when electric lights replaced the oil lamps, the base colour of the make-up had to undergo changes.

Yakshagana continues to be phenomenally popular even today. There are nearly twenty professional troupes, each offering about 180 to 200 performances per season apart from hundreds of amateur troupes. All these operate in a small geographical area of Karnataka (4 to 5 districts) and survive without any grants from the government or other agencies. The present popularity of Yakshagana can be studied only in relation to the changes taking place in the form as well as in the society where the form has survived, as both are interlinked. These changes become significant cultural markers which point out how the traditional cultural form is being reshaped and modernized, in other words re-scribed, to make it relevant to the present-the artists as well as the spectators.

As far as Yakshagana is concerned, the changes taking place now, have destabilised the entire form. But the study of these changes has most often taken the shape of an acrimonious debate. Shivarama Karanth, the great Kannada novelist and an authority on Yakshagana, is highly critical of these changes and considers the commercial troupes as being responsible for all the ‘evils’ of Yakshagana of the present (1975, 18). Martha Ashton and Bruce Christie writing in 1977, when commercial troupes had become well entrenched for more than two decades, do not even make a mention of them in their books.<sup>1</sup>

We will be in a position to understand and analyse the emerging conditions under which culture is re-scribed and is consumed only in the light of issues

analysed in chapter 1. We should also pay attention to the conflicting forces that try to appropriate and control the form as well as the meanings generated through it. In the following pages, the process of change and modernisation in Yakshagana will be studied relating it to the changes taking place in the society. These changes are leading to new tensions and power equations. Some of the changes that have a direct bearing on the issues discussed above will be taken up for closer analysis.

### COMMERCIALISATION OF YAKSHAGANA

Of all the changes taking place in Yakshagana, perhaps the one change that had far reaching implications, was the emergence of troupes that were organised on a commercial basis.<sup>2</sup> Though we can say that Yakshagana troupes were organised professionally even earlier, the shows were always open to one and all. But the commercial troupes perform in temporarily erected tents and admission is by sale of tickets. Chairs are provided for spectators (except for the ground section). Normally one show is given at one place. The next day the entire paraphernalia of tent, chairs, the stage platform, etc., will be transported to another place and set up for another all night performance. This process goes on every day during the Yakshagana season in which about 180 to 200 shows are performed. They are commonly referred to as 'tent troupes'. The traditional open-air troupes (called *harake mela* – vow performance troupes) are also in existence, though most of the 'prestige' is cornered by the tent troupes.

With commercialisation, the performative context was totally changed. There occurred a rupture in the ritualistic mould of the performance. From being a ritual in the service of a deity, the performance now became a commercial enterprise. The position of the patron, vis a vis the performance also underwent a radical shift. With commercial troupes, it was no more the munificence of one patron that afforded the opportunity for the entire village to witness the performance and be part of the ritualistic activity. Now, any one who pays money and buys a ticket becomes a patron. Thus from the patronage of one person, there came about a radical shift where all the spectators from the erstwhile landlords to the landless labourers, became patrons. Traditionally one of the significances of Yakshagana was to uphold and assert the position of the patron in society and to give it a religious

sanctification as it were (Bapat, 1998, 195–199). This significance ceased to operate with commercialisation. The seating arrangement in tent troupes is also reflective of this change with the divisions now based on rates of admission and not on one's caste or position in society. In this shift we can see how division of class has replaced that of caste.<sup>3</sup>

In traditional open air troupes, the patron has the right to choose the *prasanga* to be performed. With commercial troupes, the right has now passed on to the paying public. This fundamental shift in the composition of who 'controls' the conditions of performance, was not felt to be a break from tradition to begin with. But slowly and imperceptibly the troupes began to feel the need to cater to and satisfy the desires of the paying public. Thus effectively, the control of performance passed from the hands of the rich and the land lords to the nebulous desire of the paying public– the large majority. An understanding of this radical shift is of paramount importance in situating the process of modernity and change in Yakshagana.

Due to commercialisation, many other changes also inevitably followed. Performances were not confined to specific ritualistic occasions or particular days. The troupes invariably perform every night during the season. The venues of performance have also shifted from villages to bigger centres. As a result of the constant travel, the interaction between the artists and spectators, about their performance (which used to take place in the past), has almost vanished.<sup>4</sup> The troupes are now forced to include at least one new *prasanga* every year in their repertory to attract spectators. This has resulted in the writing of new *prasangas*, based on new themes (which has been dealt with in the next section).

After about four decades of great success and popularity, one strange development in the present decade, has been reduction in the number of commercial troupes and a phenomenal rise in the number of traditional open-air troupes offering ritualistic performances. There has also been an increase in the number of patrons who sponsor these performances. These are not merely from the erstwhile land owning castes, but a major chunk of the present day patrons are those that have migrated from their villages to different parts of India and abroad and have become affluent. This is specially true of the two coastal districts of Udupi and Mangalore. Many have become successful in the hotel industry (the famed Udupi hotels). The sponsoring of the open air performances has become one way of asserting their links with



the village and also of exhibiting their present wealth and position. In this, we can witness how the same traditional form is being used to convey entirely new social meanings, where it becomes a fine instance of 're-scribed tradition'.

#### NEW *Prasangas*—NEW DISCOURSE

Yakshagana has never confined itself to a set of canonised texts. New *prasangaas* were being written in the past also.<sup>5</sup> But in the second half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, this activity got a sudden boost. The demand also arose from the commercial troupes, as they adopted the policy of including at least one new *prasanga* in their repertory every season, in order to attract the spectators. So, the troupes assign the task of writing new *prasangas* to the authors. Not all *prasangas* that are written, are performed. Some are only literary exercises. Only those that have seen a measure of success are considered here. The new *prasangas* that are being written now can be classified under the following heads:

- a) based on the epics and *puranas*
  - b) based on the life of one character
  - c) based on folk heroes, local legends
  - d) *Sthala-purana* - depicting the temple myths of deities
  - e) not based on *puranas*; either fictitious or based on new sources (including popular movies)
- a) Traditionally Yakshagana *prasangas* always dealt with the stories from the pan-Indian epics and *puranas*. But each *prasanga* deals with one particular episode from the broad canvas of the epics. For example *Krishna Sandhana* deals with the episode from the *Mahabharata* when Krishna goes to Kaurava's court as an emissary of peace on behalf of the Pandavas. When new *prasangas* began to be written, the earliest attempts dealt with episodes from the classical sources that had not been dealt with earlier. Some of those, also attempted in giving a new, modernist interpretation to the epic stories. For example, *Mahakali Maghadendra* (1985, the story of Jarasandha, the King of Maghada), by Amruta Someshvara depicts him as a split personality, torn between two conflicting pulls leading to his tragic death. Attempts such as the above, were not considered a break from tradition, as the basic epic framework was not infringed.

- b) The next attempt also kept the framework of the *puranas*, but instead of dealing with single episodes, they centred around the entire life story of certain characters. *Samagra Bhishma*, *Madhura Mahindra* are examples of this kind. The first one for example, deals with the whole life story of Bhishma. These were three separate *prasangas* dealing with three different episodes of Bhishma's life. They were compiled together with suitable editing. Such attempts met with a fair amount of success in commercial troupes, in the initial days.
- c) As discussed earlier the narratives dealt with in Yakshagana, have always been taken from the pan Indian epics and *puranas*. The Bhakti movement specially the Vaishnava cult, of which Udupi is an important centre, used Yakshagana for the propagation of these stories and the messages embedded in them. The stories regarding the local legends or the folk heroes never formed part of the Yakshagana repertoire. (This stands in contrast to *mudalapaya*, the dance-drama form prevalent in the planes of Karnataka – where such stories are regularly performed). It should also be kept in mind that the worship of the local deities – like *Bhuta* and *Naga* (spirit/ ancestral worship and worship of the snake) has a greater following in the coastal districts. But stories of the local deities never appeared in Yakshagana till recently. (Such an attempt is also related to the emergence of Tulu Yakshagana. The hegemony of the official discourse of Yakshagana against which such attempts were a voice of protest will be discussed later). *Prasangas* like *Tulunada Siri*, *Amara Shilpi Kalkuda*, *Koti Chennaya* were all about the folk heroes of the coastal belt and were based on folk epics. This was a marked departure from tradition and can be viewed as an assertion of local identity. These *prasangas* became so hugely popular that apart from the commercial troupes, even traditional open air troupes began performing them.
- d) We have already seen how Yakshagana has always had a strong ritualistic basis. A recent phenomenon where this has found a new expression is in the new *prasangas* that depict the temple myths called *Sthala Purana* or *Kshetra Mahatme* (myth depicting the sacredness of the pilgrimage centre). These *prasangas* are mostly performed by the open air troupes and have a large following. Appealing to the religious sentiment, troupes make a fair deal of money playing these *prasangas*.
- e) The last group of new *prasangas* are those that do not have any ritualistic

appeal nor are they based on any sources either classical or folk. These are either totally fictitious, in the sense that they are products of the fertile imagination of the writer or are based on literary sources. Some have even drawn inspiration from Shakespeare.<sup>6</sup> Some recent *prasangas* have taken the plots even from films. These new *prasangas* were severely criticised for destroying the ‘tradition’, but now they have not merely been accepted, some of them have also become phenomenally popular.

These new *prasangas*, at the apparent level, seem to reflect the same value system and world view that is reflected in the traditional *prasangas*. Though some of these values are now being challenged and are undergoing a process of change in society (like the hierarchical division of caste for example), these new *prasangas* uphold the same values. Look at the following comment by a critic “In the performance of these stories also, the values of a bygone feudalistic society are depicted – fatalism, caste inequalities, the theory of *Karma*, one’s caste being decided by one’s *Karma* of the previous life, inequalities due to birth – these are the values depicted” (Damle, 1990, 24).

No doubt the propagation of such value system and world view has enabled these *prasangas* to be accepted even by traditional viewers. But to assume that these are the only messages communicated in these *prasangas*, would be to miss the point. Even as these *prasangas* implicitly accept and work within the traditional framework, many new voices and visions are also projected. For example a new *prasanga*, *Shudra Tapaswini*, at the manifest level conveys the retrograde message that the son of a *shudra* woman is bound to take the sinful path. But the text also depicts the fight for justice and equality by the *shudra* woman who has been cheated. In *Nagashree* one of the major characters is a fisher woman. Similarly in *Bappanadu Kshetra Mahatme*, the protagonist is a Muslim. Characters like these had never appeared in Yakhsagana. Thus many a time the framework of the traditional values that these *prasangas* depict remains only a frame within which the writers and artists take the freedom to depict new, often opposite messages. The moral order and world view of the traditional *prasangas* are retained as an excuse and lip sympathy is paid to them, so that these *prasangas* become acceptable as continuation of the tradition even as other messages are being transmitted. Such a process, many a time, may not be a conscious decision, but the result of divergent pressures on the artists as well. Instances such as these are pointers as to how

modernity enters through the back door even while keeping the guise of tradition.

Some writers have also tried to project radically new messages in *prasangas* like *Amarendra Vijaya* and *Manishada* even when they use stories from the *puranas*. This new found freedom regarding the themes, has also been used by many writers to project more immediate topics like pollution and deforestation.

In spite of the initial opposition, these new *prasangas* in Kannada have become well established now. They have also become extremely popular specially as played by commercial troupes. As Vithala Beladi says, “[These new *prasangas*]... have been the reason for the economic prosperity of many troupes” (1981, 125). The popularity of these new ‘fictitious’ *prasangas* perhaps points to the reduced appeal of the religious discourse and message of traditional *prasangas*. Another point that needs to be mentioned here is that new *prasangas* are more popular with the younger generation and the new spectators.

Though these new *prasangas* deal with different themes, the temporal framework of a bygone age is always maintained. As a result, in the performance of these *prasangas*, the traditional costumes are retained. Dance and music also have remained traditional. So, the aura of fantasy that is an essential feature of Yakshagana is maintained. The only question that scholars and critics ask now is whether the theme is suitable for the ambience of Yakshagana and not whether it is based on epics and *puranas*.

## THE PROCESS OF SECULARISATION

### *Reinterpretation of Traditional Themes*

One of the most obvious developments in Yakshagana in the last few decades has been a movement away from ritual towards entertainment. This process of deritualisation, with the decreasing religious appeal is intimately linked not merely to commercialisation but also to the influence of modernity on the society as a whole. This movement of Yakshagana from ritual and ostensible religious message to entertainment has been termed ‘secularisation’ in this study.

Traditionally the themes of Yakshagana have always been taken from the pan Indian epics and *puranas*. The written text as well as the performance highlights the fight between *dharma* and *adharma* with the victory of *dharma* in the end. The wicked characters like Kaurava and Ravana are punished and *dharma* upheld. The *prasangas* highlight the message that faith in God alone will enable individuals to overcome all the difficulties of life and achieve true fulfilment. The entire performance was considered to be a celebration of God's *lila* (divine play). The strong influence of the Bhakti movement was responsible for such a framework.

One of the most fundamental changes taking place in Yakshagana now is the reduced ritualistic appeal. This is getting expressed not merely in the changed performative context, but also in the discourse presented on the stage. One example of this expression is the way in which characters like Karna, Kamsa, Kicaka etc. are delineated now. Traditionally characters such as these, are recognised as *pratinayaka* (anti-hero). They were in the past represented as wicked, evil characters, who were punished in the end by the forces of good. The traditional make-up and costume of these characters also highlighted their wickedness.

But in present day performances, through a process of reinterpretation, these 'wicked' characters are represented in a totally different perspective. Though the traditional written text is used, it is edited suitably. So a radically altered version of the performance text is created. In this, emphasis is laid on 'humanising' these wicked characters. They are not presented as evil characters who have broken the moral order and thus pitted themselves against God and *dharma*. Instead, the performance text projects these characters as having many worthy qualities but due to one weakness (tragic flaw?) in them, they are shown as having chosen the path that they have taken. The performance text highlights their worthy qualities. By a shift of emphasis, the wicked characters are made the protagonists. The characters are presented and developed in such a way that the audience begins to sympathise with their predicament. As a result, instead of highlighting the religious message, which is the main thrust of the written text, a radically different performance text is created highlighting the 'tragic' predicament of the protagonist.

This process of transformation can be better understood if we analyse a few examples and realise how the new performance text is created. We can analyse the manner in which Kamsa's story is depicted in Yakshagana now. There are several *prasangas* dealing with the childhood of Krishna and the killing of Kamsa, his maternal uncle. One for example is titled *Krishna Balalile* (The Divine play [about] the childhood of Krishna). As is clear from the title, the thrust of the text is about the childhood of Krishna. The killing of Kamsa formed only a part and came as the climax that upheld the divinity of Krishna. But in the performances now, only the final moments of Kamsa's life are depicted. Thus the performance centres round Kamsa and his final moments, highlighting his fear of death, the consciousness of the impending end, his futile attempts to alter his fate, his ultimate failure, etc. Thus Kamsa becomes the protagonist as a result of which the discourse is drastically altered. Krishna instead of being the protagonist (as in the past), becomes only an agent who causes the death of Kamsa. Instead of witnessing the divinity of Krishna and the way he upholds *dharma* by killing the wicked Kamsa, the audience now witnesses the tragic fate of a man who fights against the inexorable forces that have decided on his death.

The same shift of emphasis from good characters to wicked characters can be seen in the depiction of characters like Jarasandha, Dustabuddhi (in *Chandrasahsa Charitre*), Ravana, Kaurava, (Duryodhana) Karna, etc. This kind of reversal of the discourse using the same traditional written text becomes possible in Yakshagana because of the following reasons:

i) An isolated episode from the epic world

Every Yakshagana *prasanga* deals with one particular event drawn from the vast canvas of the epic world. As such, only a small incident of a character's life is presented. For example, the *prasanga*, *Gadayuddha* deals with the last day of the Kurukshetra war in which only the final moments of Duryodhana's life are presented. As the *prasanga* does not deal with his entire life, his evil deeds of the past are not depicted. (References to it may be made in the improvised speech). Because of such a structure of the written text, the task of reinterpretation by the artists and its acceptance by the viewers becomes easier.

## ii) Suitable editing of the written script

In Yakshagana, the whole of the written text is never used in performance. A certain amount of editing has always been in practice.<sup>7</sup> This liberty is used now to edit the *prasanga* in such a way as to highlight the anti-heroes. To take the example of *Gadayuddha* again, the written text, in keeping with the literary tradition of Vyasa and Kumara Vyasa (the author of Kannada *Mahabharata*), centres round the divine presence of Krishna. The written script contains five episodes culminating with Dharmaraya's coronation under the supervision of Krishna at the end of the great war. But in the performance texts now, only two episodes - Kaurava's desolate state when he hides in the lake and his final battle with Bhima are depicted. So, it focusses on Kaurava who replaces Krishna as the protagonist. The performance text thus subverts the ideology of the written text even as it makes use of the same (or parts of the same) written text.

## iii) Freedom provided by the improvised dialogue

As explained earlier, the dialogue in Yakshagana is not part of the received text. It is created by the actor during performance itself. This freedom provided by the form, is used by the artists to present the wicked characters in a new light. (It may be mentioned here that this is one of the means through which Yakshagana has always remained contemporaneous. This freedom afforded by the improvised dialogue has always been used by the artists to bridge the epic world presented on the stage with the quotidian world of every day existence.)

To take the example mentioned earlier, Kaurava is presented through the improvised text, as a person who believes that man can shape his own destiny in contrast to the Pandavas, who are dependent on God's grace, being guided at every step by Krishna. So instead of the opposition between *dharma* and *adharma*, a new opposition – man v/s fate—gets posited. As a result of this fundamentally new discourse that the performance text projects, the religious message that we find in the written text, is totally subverted.

The best example of this shift can be seen in the depiction of Karna. This is also a fine instance of how a 'modern' discourse, having a direct bearing on the current social and political tensions, gets projected in present day performances. In the *Mahabharata*, Karna is depicted as one of the four wicked

characters. Earlier, *Karna Parva* was performed with emphasis on scenes of battle, highlighting the eponymous hero's courage and his unflinching loyalty to Kaurava. The costume, with the huge black distinctive Yakshagana headgear (*mundasa*), highlighted his valour. But a great shift has taken place in the presentation of Karna's character now. The new discourse, highlights the insult and injustice suffered by him because of his 'low' caste, his intense feeling of being an orphan, etc. This can be directly related to the sociopolitical situation of post independent India with the erstwhile low castes' demand now for justice and equality. The tragedy of Karna that gets projected now and his demand for equal opportunity in spite of his 'low' caste, has no basis in the received text as is pointed out by Prabhakara Joshi, an astute critic of Yakshagana. "The tragic picture of Karna that the artist creates, the oscillation in his mind between the Kauravas and the Pandavas do not have a basis in the written text except for one or two songs at the end. The *Prasanga* is a straight forward narration and Karna is pictured as a courageous haughty personality" (1986, 64).

Many examples can also be given to demonstrate how the response of the audience is subtly controlled through the improvised dialogue and they are made to sympathise with these villainous characters.<sup>8</sup>

#### *Subversion of the religious message*

As a result of these changes, the performance text presents a discourse that is totally different from that of the written text. The opposition between *dharma* and *adharma*, with the victory of *dharma* in the end (through the agency of one of God's incarnations), is the crux of the written text. When this message is totally altered by 'glorifying' the wicked characters, the new discourse becomes not merely 'deritualised' but projects a perspective that may even be termed 'anti-religious'. This subversive discourse of the new performance text is quite often accepted as a continuation of traditional Yakshagana. (In comparison to the new *prasangas*, the performance of the old *prasangas* based on the epics, appears traditional). The performers as well as the spectators do not seem to be aware of the deeply subversive message that is communicated in these new performance texts. It should also be mentioned here that these reinterpretations have become highly popular.

This process of secularisation whereby the prominence of the religious



message is altered and sometimes subverted can be related to several factors. The first is the process of commercialisation whereby the ritualistic context of performance was completely changed. In such a 'deritualised' context, the reinterpretations could be attempted by the performers and accepted by the viewers. Another important impetus was the influence of modern education. Such reinterpretations were first attempted in *Talamaddale* (a variant of Yakshagana where only music and *vacikabhinaya* in the form of improvised dialogue – is employed). During the last few decades, many educated persons entered the field of *Talamaddale*. In their reinterpretations of the wicked characters, they were clearly influenced by the model of western tragedy (specially Greek and Shakespearean). They tried to present the anti-heroic characters in this tragic light. Such reinterpretations became quite popular and were tried on the stage also. All the present day artists have followed and developed on this model.<sup>8</sup>

We can see in this instance how modernity (in this case, the western model of tragedy) has led to a redefining and reshaping of the traditional discourse. It is deeply ironical that this modernised reinterpretation, is often thought of as the continuation of tradition when compared to other more drastic forms of change taking place in Yakshagana now.

It should also be kept in mind that such attempts were possible only in the deritualised context of present day performances. In the changing socio-religious context, the religious message of the written text also perhaps does not carry the same significance or appeal as it did in the past. As pointed out by one critic, if in the past, the audience viewed the gods appearing on the stage as true entities who had the supreme power of controlling the lives of all human beings, now they are viewed as part of an aesthetic process.<sup>9</sup> The clear movement of the form from ritual to efficacy and entertainment can be perceived here.

## TULU YAKSHAGANA – POLITICS AND IDENTITY

Of the many changes taking place in Yakshagana now, perhaps the most contentious one has been the emergence of Tulu Yakshagana. Tulu is one of the Dravidian languages spoken by the vast majority primarily in Udupi and Mangalore districts of Karnataka. Until recently even in Tulu speaking regions, Yakshagana was traditionally performed only in Kannada. But in the last few

decades, with the emergence of Tulu Yakshagana, the southern style of Yakshagana (called *Tenkutittu*) has been taken by a storm. Tulu *prasangas* have come to dominate *Tenkutittu* Yakshagana to such an extent that it is often difficult to come across a Kannada Yakshagana performance now. This development of Tulu Yakshagana has become a very controversial topic among Yakshagana lovers and critics, with very strong opinions being expressed on the both sides. The reasons for this are not merely linguistic. Tulu Yakshagana has brought with it many other changes. Aspects of traditional Yakshagana like costume structure, themes, dance style have all changed. This has resulted in the cry that Tulu Yakshagana is leading to the death of the centuries old tradition of Yakshagana. At the same time it is also true that Tulu Yakshagana has become extremely popular and managers of professional troupes say that they cannot survive unless they perform Tulu Yakshagana.

The sudden emergence of this drastically new form within the traditional mould of Yakshagana, can be understood in its proper perspective, only by situating it in the larger context of the sociopolitical changes taking place in the Tulu society, which have led to conflicting ideologies. A brief sketch of Tulu's linguistic and cultural background and its relation to Kannada, would help us in understanding the situation better. Only such a holistic view would situate this phenomenon in its proper perspective.

In the Tulu speaking region in urban areas many are bilingual as they know Kannada also. But in the villages specially among the illiterates, a sizable number do not even follow Kannada. Tulu has rich oral literature (including folk epics), but till recently had very little written literature. Historically this coastal belt has almost always been under the suzerainty of the kingdoms of the main land (Deccan Plateau) like the Hoysalas, the Vijayanagar kings, the Keladi rulers, the Mysore Kings, etc. until the 19<sup>th</sup> century when it came under direct British rule and became part of Madras presidency. As a result of this political domination, Kannada became the language of administration, education and 'high' culture. So, Tulu, though spoken by the majority of the people, did not enjoy the prestige that was accorded to Kannada.

It is only recently that Tulu language and culture are being studied seriously. Many academies and institutions have been established to facilitate such a study. Eminent international folklorists like Peter Claus and Lauri Honko are studying different aspects of Tulu folklore. Among Tulu speakers also, a new awareness regarding their linguistic and cultural identity is growing. So

far as Tulu Yakshagana is concerned, the first Tulu *prasanga* was written way back in 1887 by Sankayya Bhagavata on the request of the ruler of Vitla, one of chieftans of Tulu land. The next attempt was the translation of Kannada *prasanga*, *Krishna Sandhana* in 1929. The first real breakthrough was the writing of *Koti Chennayya*, based on Tulu folk heroes, in 1940 by Pandibettu Venkata Rao. From 1960s onwards, Tulu Yakshagana began to be written and performed regularly (Vivek Rai, 1977, 110-116).

Tulu Yakshagana has broken away from traditional Yakshagana in very significant ways. Along with language, many other aspects have also undergone a change. (This is in line with the perception of structural linguistics that our cognition of the world, is dependent on the language we have at our disposal. When the language changes, the cognition also changes). The most important change was in the selection of themes. Tulu *prasangas* took as their themes the myths dealing with the local deities and folk heroes of Tulu land. *Prasangas* were based on Tulu oral literature and the myths relating to folk heroes and deities like Koti Chennaya, Siri, Kalkuda etc., were depicted. This was a rupture from the tradition of Yakshagana where the themes were always drawn from classical sources. With this shift, there came about a change in the costume structure also because the traditional costumes were designed to signify the characters of the epic world—the gods, demons and the superhuman beings. As a result, the entire costume structure with its signification was rejected in Tulu Yakshagana. The new costumes are yet to evolve a signifying typology of their own.

The earliest Tulu *prasangas* dealt with the folk heroes and local legends but soon they were in search of new themes due to commercial compulsions. The present day *prasangas* do not have any such grounding in folk sources or classical epics. They are now most often the product of the writer's imagination and deal with some imaginary local chieftain of Tulu land. (Such *prasangas* have become the norm in Kannada as well.)

Tulu Yakshagana has also got rid of the traditional ritualistic features like *purvaranga*—preliminaries and *mangala* – the ritualistic close. Other aspects of Yakshagana like the music, performance structure and context and the organisational pattern are all maintained. The traditional dance is also maintained though in a curtailed form. The value system and world view projected is almost the same as that of traditional *prasangas*. At the manifest level it appears to project a status quoist position with a strong assertion of traditional values.

These changes brought about by Tulu Yakshagana have shaken the very roots of traditional Yakshagana. Many scholars are holding this form responsible for destroying the beauty of Yakshagana (Joshi, 1986, 67-69). Others seem to think of this new form only in terms of the language shift—from Kannada to Tulu. Even the supporters of Tulu Yakshagana are prone to the same conceptual error when they brand the critics of Tulu Yakshagana as ‘opponents of Tulu’.

A new form of cultural expression like Tulu Yakshagana does not emerge and gain acceptability, even popularity unless there is a strong cultural, social and even political urge for such an expressive form. Tulu Yakshagana stands as an extreme example of what I have termed, “re-scribed tradition”. I have used the term ‘extreme’, because in Tulu Yakshagana elements of the tradition are used, but are used for a drastically different purpose. The rupture from the past is very overt and apparent which is not always the case in other expressions of re-scribed tradition even within Yakshagana. Here traditional cultural form is restructured and recorded in a radical way whereby it has begun to convey meanings for which it was never originally intended. It has also become a vehicle for expressing clash of ideologies where different linguistic, political and social groups dismantle and rescribe the past, whereby it is made to express their contemporary aspirations.

In Tulu Yakshagana, the social tensions and contending power equations of different social and linguistic groups find expression in the discourse of the performance at a deeply subliminal level. In order to comprehend its entire significance, we have to look not merely at what Tulu Yakshagana chooses to represent but also at what it chooses not to represent. This negative signification also becomes very important in comprehending the total meaning of Tulu Yakshagana.

In order to understand the newly emerging social and cultural tensions and aspirations, we have to situate them in the sociopolitical changes taking place in Tulu land in post independent India. Till recently, ownership of land (and the social prestige attached to it) was mostly in the hands of Brahmins, Bunts, Jains etc. But now, the other castes and communities, classified as backward are contending with these communities for power and position. Because of their numerical strength, politically also they are learning to assert their power in the democratic set up. With the abolition of tenancy in 1970s in Karnataka, many of them have also become land owners. Specially

the Billavas (toddy tappers), Mogaviras (fishing community) are now becoming politically and socially powerful. The unquestioned hegemony of the upper castes is increasingly coming under challenge leading to new social equations and tensions. With political and economic independence, there naturally grew an aspiration for asserting their ethnic and cultural identity as well. The recently renovated temple built by Sri Narayana Guru, a saint who in the early part of twentieth century had worked for the upliftment of backward classes in Kerala and Dakshina Kannada, has now become a centre for the Billava community. This growing awareness has resulted in the struggle for political, economic power leading to new power equations and social tensions.

Along with this, an anti-Brahminical trend is also emerging specially among the educated sections. Brahminism as a concept is also coming under increasing challenge though its hold over the community at large is still pretty strong.

Coming to the question of language, the hegemony of Kannada over Tulu was quite marked. Traditional Yakshagana in Kannada, was also part of this hegemony. This appears very odd because Bhakti movement played an important role in utilising Yakshagana to communicate the message of the pan Indian epics and *puranas* to the masses. One of the basic tenets of the Bhakti movement was to communicate to the masses in the spoken tongue, but in Tulu land it preferred to do so in Kannada. In addition, most of the people of Tulu land are worshippers of the local cults and deities. Commenting on the importance of local traditions of ritual and worship to the Tulu people, Amruta Someshwara a Tulu scholar and writer says, "However so far as folk religions of Tulu Nadu are concerned, the conventional religions... are of no relevance. Folk deities like *Bhuta* (spirit) and *Nagaradhane* (snake worship) have dominated the life of the common folk for centuries" (1991, 556). In spite of such a predominance, we have seen how myths regarding these deities were never part of Yakshagana lore. It was always the pan Indian 'great tradition' (to use Milton Singer's term) that was represented in Yakshagana and not the 'little traditions' of which most artists and spectators were followers.

It is in the light of all these contending and conflicting forces in the political, social and ritualistic spheres that we have to situate the emergence of Tulu Yakshagana. It was not a simple question of replacing one language with

another. Tulu Yakshagana became the vehicle of expression of the assertion of linguistic, ethnic and religious (non Brahminical) identity. The form of Yakshagana (which was felt as their own) was retained but the discourse of traditional Yakshagana was rejected. The new Tulu *prasangas* (at least in the beginning), were about the folk deities and heroes of Tulu culture. *Prasangas* like *Koti Cennaya*, *Amara Shilpi Kalkuda*, *Tulunada Siri*, etc., bear witness to this.

In order to fully comprehend the significance of the change, we have to look not merely at what Tulu Yakshagana has chosen to represent but also at what it has chosen not to represent. The traditional *prasangas* of Yakshagana, based on the pan Indian epics and *puranas* have almost totally been rejected. This can be seen as a rejection of the classical Aryan-Brahminical tradition. As a corollary to this, the costumes and make-up structure that represented these epic characters, have also been rejected. Though a new costume typology has not emerged as yet, what is rejected appears more significant than what is actually represented.

Thus Tulu Yakshagana represents a rejection of the language (Kannada) as well as the cultural, thematic framework of the epics and *puranas* which they represented. The same performing art, Yakshagana, now in Tulu, performs a totally different function – not the reassertion of classical Aryan-Brahminical tradition (with which the epics and *puranas* have come to be associated), but the subaltern defiance as represented by the rejection of the language as well as the classical discourse.

This does not mean that Tulu Yakshagana was a very conscious effort at representing the forces and tensions that have been analysed so far. It is not even certain if all the participants – artists, writers, spectators are aware of all the ramifications. As with all cultural forms of expression, Yakshagana is also a highly symbolic system, where different layers of meaning are embedded. Tulu Yakshagana, at the manifest level, upholds the same value system as that of traditional Yakshagana. But to take these meanings as the only meaning, would be to miss its true significance. Because at the immanent level, it has become an expressive vehicle for newly emerging identities and ideologies. In it we have a fine example of what Mikhail Bakhtin, the great Russian thinker, calls polysemy of voices, where the same performance, expresses both official and unofficial ideologies. Such polysemy of voices has always been present in Yakshagana, but in Tulu Yakshagana, the unofficial

ideology is expressed in loud and clear terms. A similar process of change can be witnessed in the rituals related to the worship of *Bhuta* also now.

Tulu Yakshagana as it is developing now, stands as a fine example of what Richard Bauman calls, 'the emergent quality of performance'. He points out how the text and the event structure are not static but emerge during the performance itself. This emergent quality of performance becomes more pronounced when society is undergoing a process of change. He says, "The emergent structure of performance event is of special interest under conditions of change as participants adapt established patterns of performance to new circumstances" (Bauman , 42).

He also makes another important observation about how the social structure itself may also emerge during performance. "In addition to text and event structure, we may uncover a third kind of structure emergent in performance, namely social structure" (Bauman, 42). The emergent quality of social structure is of course not confined only to performance, but cultural forms, being potent forms of expression, may and often do contribute to the emerging social structure, Tulu Yakshagana has thus not merely become an expression of social change but has also become an agent of that change.

Another important change also needs to be recorded here. In the present decade, the popularity of Tulu Yakshagana appears to be decreasing. Its cultural space seems to have been taken over by modern Tulu theatre. It is as yet too early to analyse the reasons for such a change. Are we to assume that the subaltern voice of Tulu identity has now gained the status of official discourse, one wonders.

## OPPOSITE PULLS-REVIVALISM

In the analysis so far, we have seen various examples of modernisation—how the traditional format of Yakshagana is being recoded and restructured so that it has become expressive of new urges and meanings. At the same time there have also been attempts at 'revivalism', an attempt to 'cleanse' and 'purify' the form and retrieve those aspects of tradition that are presumed to have been lost. In accommodating those contrasting pulls, Yakshagana as a form, shows its flexibility even while being tradition bound. Arjun Appadurai classifies cultural forms as hard and soft. He explains the distinction thus:

Hard cultural forms are those that come with a set of links between value, meaning

and embodied practice that are difficult to break and hard to transform. Soft cultural forms, by contrast, are those that permit relatively easy separation of embodied performance from meaning and value and relatively successful transformation at each level. (1997, 90).

As a traditional form that is undergoing a process of modernisation, Yakshagana, has been exposed to the opposing pulls of commercialisation as well as attempts at revivalism and retrieval. So we can say that it exhibits qualities of being both hard and soft.

The changes that we have studied so far, are the changes that have emanated from 'within', in the sense that they have been changes brought about by the performers themselves – the artists, organisers, managers of troupes etc. Many of these changes have not been conscious, preplanned attempts at modernisation. They grew and took shape over decades in response to the changing situations and new challenges.

At the same time, there have also been attempts at conscious reformation specially by scholars and intellectuals. These may be termed changes from 'without'. On the one hand, these were 'revivalistic' attempts, which tried to 'purify' the form and claim for it a classical status; on the other, these were also attempts to project the form on the national stage, specially to non Kannada speakers. This can be seen as part of the national urge in pre and post independent India to project an 'authentic' Indian culture in opposition to the colonial discourse, where similar attempts were going on in different parts of India. Two such attempts at 'revivalism', from two different perspectives, are analysed here.

#### *Shivarama Karanth and Yaksharanga*

Shivarama Karanth was one of the leading writers in Kannada. Though he was a multifaceted personality, Yakshagana had always been dear to his heart. He did a lot of research and wrote extensively on Yakshagana. He also conducted a number of workshops involving senior artists and he tried to retrieve many aspects that were 'forgotten'. Where certain aspects were totally 'lost', he recreated new ones, but keeping them within the overall Yakshagana structure. The head-gear used by female characters is a case in point. The headgear that is in use now, is Karanth's own contribution, but has come to be accepted as part of tradition. After several years of experimentation, he



started a new troupe, Yaksharanga in 1975, where he began experimenting and giving shape to his new concept of Yakshagana.

Karant was inspired by western ballet and Indian dance traditions like Kathakali and Bharatnatyam, where communication takes place only through music and dance and speech is not utilised. Karant's main effort was to popularise Yakshagana in non-Kannada speaking areas, but for such an effort, language in the form of improvised dialogue was a big impediment. So, he decided to get rid of it altogether. Because of this fundamental change, other changes necessarily followed. Music and dance now had to take over the function of improvised speech. For this, great attention was paid to clarity of articulation in singing; instead of one singer, two singers were used; western musical instruments like violin and saxophone were also made use of. Great attention was paid to choreography and the composition of group movements. Emphasis was laid on the expression of particular emotional states through dance and body movements. In costumes, instead of the heavy wooden headgears and accoutrements, lighter ones made of different materials were used. Minute attention was paid to the costume and colour structure for all the characters. Karant himself choreographed every scene meticulously.

Karant's experiments have succeeded in making Yakshagana known in nontraditional areas. If Yakshagana is today recognised as an important traditional dance-drama of India at the national level, a large part of the credit for this belongs to Karant. These experiments had a positive impact on professional troupes as well. A greater awareness regarding the overall design and neatness in costumes now can be attributed to the efforts of Karant. The same can be said about the greater attention now being paid to dance, particularly in the northern style.

But Karant's attempts were vehemently attacked by traditional artists and viewers, for the many changes that he had introduced. Getting rid of improvised speech was particularly seen as destroying the very essence of Yakshagana. One critic for example, commented, "By giving up such a powerful aspect of Yakshagana [improvised dialogues] efforts may be made to establish Yakshagana on the international scene, but such a step would definitely mean the death of Yakshagana in its place of origin" (P.V. Bhat, 1981, 128).

It is interesting to note that these experiments were conducted by Karanth in the name of preserving tradition. His effort of projecting Yakshagana at the national level, was also part of the 'project' of creating a national cultural as a counter to the colonial discourse. In the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, this was a dream that many great thinkers and artists in different parts of India had and Karanth also shared this dream. But in making Yakshagana acceptable at the national and international level, he did not realise the danger of the form losing its base. A similar crisis faces many other traditional forms of India, that are getting more and more international exposure now (like Kathakali and Kudiattam).

Another break from tradition was that in Yaksharanga, the entire artistic product was conception of Karanth, where he took over the role of a director (like any modern theatrical production). All the artists functioned under his guidance and supervision. This kind of practice, of one director controlling the entire performance, is unheard of in Yakshagana. Though Yakshagana is a group activity where many performers function together, there has never been the practice of one person exercising total artistic control.<sup>12</sup> Each actor is free to create the character according to his vision and talent. In spite of such an individualistic approach, the performance, which is a group activity, becomes possible because of the strongly built up conventions. This kind of a creative process, where the artistic output is the cumulative product of many individual talents and inputs, is typical of folk culture.

Though Yaksharanga did not have a lasting impact on Yakshagana as a whole, there can be no doubt about Karanth's contribution to Yakshagana. It was largely due to his efforts that Yakshagana was recognised as an important dance-drama of India. His research and contribution in the areas of Yakshagana music, costume, literature have been very significant. But in trying to purify and classicalise the form, he did not pay attention to the social dimensions of this traditional form or the culture making processes of which the changes were the markers.

Karanth's experiments inspired many others to attempt new experimentations. Mention may be made of Udyavara Madhava Acharya's group Sahana and Saketa Kalavidaru, who have tried to evolve a new idiom of Yakshagana. Raghava Nambiar has tried to retrieve the past, by performing only in torch light. He has also authored a book on Yakshagana music.

*Keremane Shambu Hegde: Contemporaneity within Tradition*

Another important effort at redefining tradition from within the professional commercial setup, was that of Keremane Shambu Hegde, the leading Yakshagana artist of the present. Coming from a family of Yakshagana artists, he had received the tradition of the northern style of Yakshagana by heredity. Three years of training in choreography under Maya Rao the great exponent of Kathak and modern choreography, exposed him to other dance traditions of India and made him aware of the potential of Yakshagana.

He started his career in commercial troupes and began his experimentation in the delineation of characters. He laid emphasis on the elaborate exposition of *bhava* (emotional state) and the creative use of dance for this purpose. He began to feel the need for creative freedom and started his own troupe in 1973.

He has played a variety of roles in his career—good ones like Rama, Hariscandra to wicked ones like Kamsa and Ravana. At a time when new, fictitious *prasangas* became very popular in the commercial circuit, he insisted on performing traditional *prasangas*. His originality lies in searching for a contemporary relevance in these narratives from *puranas*. He uses all facets of Yakshagana like music, costume, dance and improvised speech, to create this new discourse.

Instead of the traditional categorisation of characters as good, wicked etc., Hegde insists of humanising those characters and projects the conflict within these characters. This can be seen in his depiction of ‘good’ characters like Rama or Dasharatha or in wicked characters like Kamsa or Karna. He also had a big hand in popularising the process of secularisation referred to earlier.

In order to create the new interpretation visually as well, Shambhu Hegde has not merely used the traditional dance steps in a new way to project new meanings, but has also created some new ones. For example, he explained how he used a new body movement, to express the awareness about his abilities that dawns on Hanuman (personal interview). He has also made use of many new *mudras* which were not part of the Yakshagana repertoire. Perhaps his most original contribution to Yakshagana dance has been the use of dance to communicate *shokarasa* (pathos). Earlier Yakshagana dance was used only for *vira* (valorous) and *sringara* (erotic), but Hegde began to use dance for expressing sorrow and pathos.

He also brought about many organisational changes which are now followed by almost all commercial troupes. In him we have an example of a professional performer who achieved the balance between his creativity and tradition, in addition to making it commercially viable. G.S. Bhat who has worked extensively on the contribution of Shambhu Hegde, believes that Hegde's efforts in achieving a proper balance between the different tensions mentioned above, can become a model for traditional performing arts in different parts of India (2003, 441).

If we compare the perspectives of Shivarama Karanth with that of Shambhu Hegde, we realise that Karanth was more concerned with protecting the form, and its traditional features, whereas Shambhu Hegde's attempt was to use the traditional features to create a modernist discourse. Both are concerned with protecting tradition but in different ways. One is a revivalistic attempt in trying to protect 'tradition' from the corrupting influence of modernity; the other is an attempt to negotiate with modernity by using the expressive forms of the past, or elements of them to create a new discourse. These two may be contrasting approaches to the question of tradition, but both approaches point out one important truth. Tradition can never be a still water. It is always being redefined and recoded with reference to the present; it may be in opposition to modernity or in trying to negotiate it. Tradition can only be an understanding of the past with reference to the present – how we make sense of the past here and now.

#### FOLK-CLASSICAL DEBATE

The issues raised so far and the different positions within Yakshagana with regard to modernity and change and in perceiving the past, can be seen in a microcosm as it were, in a hotly raging debate regarding the status of Yakshagana – is it folk or classical? Proponents of both the sides are equally vehement and provide proof in support of their argument. In this debate it is often forgotten that these are classifications introduced for academic purposes, and that in general perception, they have also created a hierarchy in which classical is always placed on a higher pedestal. 'Folk' has also been taken to mean unpolished, crude, without any *shastra* (rules and guidelines regarding aspects of performance). This debate can also be related to contesting social groups that aspire to control and appropriate the form and the meanings that it generates.

Yakshagana, having a continuous unbroken tradition of several centuries, has developed codified rules regarding every aspect of performance—music, dance, costumes, histrionic presentation, gesture language, etc. It takes several years of training for an aspiring youngster, to become an artist. Even after becoming an actor, it takes several more years as a performer, when he can play the lead roles. Yakshagana definitely has *shastra* controlling all the aspects of performance.

At the same time, these rules are all in the oral tradition, being handed down from generation to generation. This oral tradition is referred to by the term *nade* (lit- gait, walk). Many a time, there can be more than one *nade*, based on regional variations or sometimes even family traditions. In spite of these rules, the form has scope for flexibility, which actors always make use of. In this sense, *nade* is never static, it is always growing and changing. Any new addition, if found effective and acceptable, becomes part of this oral tradition. It is this flexibility and scope for innovation, that has allowed Yakshagana to be utilised in the many ways that we have discussed so far.

Though the geographical area of the spread of Yakshagana is limited (4-5 districts of Karnataka), within that region, it continues to be phenomenally popular. The spectators belong to all sections of society, from the landless labourers to the landed gentry, from the illiterates to the educated ones. This points out how Yakshagana continues to be a powerful form of cultural expression which the entire community feels as its own. This is a typical quality of folklore, that it can express the ethos of the entire community.

At the same time, there are certain aspects of Yakshagana that seem to have been drawn from classical sources. The preliminaries, performed before the actual *prasanga*, bear a close resemblance to what Bharata in *Natya Shastra* calls *purvaranga*. It is very clear that at some stage in its development, it has absorbed certain aspects from Sanskrit classical canons. It has also been mentioned by some scholars that some artists of the previous generation were familiar with the *Natya Sastra* (G. Shastry Najagar, 2007, IV.)

The proponents of the classical status, want Yakshagana to be recognised at the national and international level as one of the classical dance forms, in line with Kathakali and Bharatanatyam. This appears like a continuation of the national aspiration of reviving Indian performing arts referred to earlier. It is only natural that more and more forms from different parts of India are now staking claims to be recognised as ‘classical’ along with those that have

already been canonised under this category. For gaining such a recognition, the primary requisite is that the form should gain recognition as a classical form in the place of its activity. Shambhu Hegde for example, expresses the following opinion, “Popularity is not the only criterion. In spite of the popular appeal, what have we achieved? We have not been able to expand beyond the limited geographical boundary. Commercially we have succeeded; but what is our artistic achievement?... Forms like Bharatanatya and Kathakali have an international appeal. Forms like Jatra, Yakshagana, have given up their principles in pursuit of populism” (Shambhu Hegde, personal interview).

There appears to be a social angle also to this debate. Of the areas where Yakshagana is active, in North Kanara district, most of the performers and spectators are Brahmins. They have also been the most famous performers (stars) in the last few decades. In this often acrimonious debate, the Brahmins (artists, spectators, critics) are the strongest supporters of a classical status for Yakshagana. The non-Brahmins on the other hand, stress on the folkloristic aspects of this form. In pointing out the ‘classical’ aspects of Yakshagana, they are trying to relate Yakshagana, to the pan Indian, Sanskrit tradition and aspiring for a prominent place for the form in the cultural scene of the nation state. The proponents of the ‘folk’ nature of Yakshagana, on the other hand, emphasise on how it expresses the local culture, its rituals, belief system and ethos. This demonstrates how differently positioned social groups try to gain control over the form and the meanings that it generates. This debate is a fine example of how Yakshagana of the present becomes a re-scribed tradition in being modern and traditional, folk and classical, revivalistic and experimental at the same time.

## OTHER VISTAS OF CHANGE

Yakshagana has been witnessing many other changes as well, due to the operation of the various forces analysed above. In the past, there were three marked styles within Yakshagana – southern, northern and the far northern. With commercialisation (and better transport facilities), there has been a free movement of artists, as a result of which, there has been a merging of the different styles. This process has been more marked in the two northern styles.

The methods of training have also been changing. The old system, where an aspiring youngster learnt under a *guru* (teacher) has totally vanished. Now there are five schools, imparting training in different aspects of Yakshagana.

There has been a burst of activity, where more and more number of troupes are being organised. Many scholars feel that this spurt in activity has led to a definite fall in artistic standards. Because of the greater demand for artists, many join the troupes even before completing their training (P. Joshi, S. Hegde, personal interview).

Another important change in the present decade has been, the reduction in the number of commercial troupes and a marked rise in the number of open-air troupes. This seems like a reversal of the trend of commercialisation that had started about fifty years ago. This is an indication of how there has been a marked rise in the number of patrons who want to sponsor these 'ritualistic' performances. This shows how the ritualistic appeal of Yakshagana is still pretty strong and also how sponsorship is being used to assert the prestige and position of the sponsor. The major difference is that these new sponsors come from various social groups and not merely from the erstwhile patrons (like land lords, rich merchants etc.) Another change that has been witnessed is that even though, these are all-night performances, most of the spectators, leave after midnight, so that very few spectators, view the entire performance. Increasing number of nuclear families, and better transport facilities have accentuated this process.

As a response to such a change, performances of a shortened duration (usually 3 hours) are becoming increasingly popular. In such performances, many aspects of the traditional performance structure (like the preliminaries etc.) are omitted. Such shows are becoming more popular now, specially in urban centres.

Efforts are also being made, to popularise Yakshagana in nontraditional areas. For example, Akademi of Tenku Tittu Yakshagana, New Delhi, has been performing Yakshagana in Hindi and has met with a fair amount of success. Modern theatre has also made use of elements of Yakshagana, in its productions. The productions of directors like B.V. Karanth, K.V. Subbanna and a recent production for National School of Drama, N. Delhi (Dec. 2007) by the director C.R. Jambe, can be given as examples. All these experiments show how Yakshagana continues to be a potent form of expression even now.

## CONCLUSION

In being traditional and modern at the same time, Yakshagana stands as a fine instance of how, tradition is being redefined and recoded so that it becomes an expressive vehicle for new aspirations and new meanings. Yakshagana as a form has the flexibility to express the modern tensions and also the resilience to maintain its traditional features.

## NOTES

1. Martha Ashton tried to create an 'authentic' version of Yakshagana by collecting a group of artists and assisting them in recollecting the 'old' way in which Yakshagana was performed with its music, dance, costumes, etc. Attempts such as these, aimed at 're'creating tradition, can only lead to a fallacious notion of tradition. For details see, Richard Schechner's Introduction to Victor Turner's *Anthropology of Performance*, New York. P.A.J. Publications, 1986.
2. The first commercial troupe was started in 1942 and they began performing on a regular basis from 1948. By 1950s they became well established. At one time, there were as many as fifteen commercial troupes though their number has come down now.
3. Most of the erstwhile sponsors and patrons of Yakshagana were from the land owning upper caste groups like Brahmins, Bunts and Jains, who exercised great authority over other sections of society.
4. According to Shambhu Hegde Keremane, a leading senior Yakshagana artist, this loss of interaction and the constant rush from one centre to another has resulted in a downfall in the artistic quality. (Personal interview).
5. Padekal Vishnu Bhat has recently published a book listing all the extent and available *prasangas*. See P. Vishnu Bhat, 2006.
6. Srinivasa Havanur, an authority on 19<sup>th</sup> C. Kannada literature mentions that the first Yakshagana *prasanga* based on Shakespeare (*As You Like it*) was written as early as the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> Century. See *Taranga*, May 21, 1995, p. 28. Some *prasangas* like *Papanna Vijaya* (based on King Lear), have become very popular.
7. The written texts of Yakshagana usually contain 250–300 songs of which only about 125–150 songs are used in performance. The introductory songs (like conventional prayers etc.) are rarely used in performance. Descriptive narrative links (called *Vachana* – prose rendering) are also not used now a days. Usually two or more *prasangas* are performed in one night which also necessitates editing. Certain scenes may also be elaborated by the artists – either through dance or through improvised speech; using the freedom provided by the form. At such



moments the *bhagavata* will resort to editing during the performance itself so that the performance comes to an end by sunrise.

8. In Kannada literature, two great poets of old Kannada, Pampa (10<sup>th</sup> C., A.D.) and Ranna (10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> C., A.D.), have pictured Karna and Kaurava as noble characters deserving the sympathy of the readers. In presenting such a perspective, they differ markedly from the Sanskrit text. But it is also important to remember that they are both Jain poets and the Yakshagana *prasangas* are not based on their works.
9. G.H. Nayak, personal interview.
10. Mohan Kumar D., Chief artist and manager, Kudlu troupe, personal interview.
11. Shivarama Karanth has written, two books on Yakshagana – *Yakshagana Bayalata* (1958, Kannada) and *Yakshagana* (1975, English) These books deal with open-air troupes and are considered an authority on many aspects of Yakshagana even to this day.
12. The run of the performance, as well as the overall control is in the hands of the *bhagavata*, the main singer.

## CHAPTER 3

# KATHAKALI

### INTRODUCTION

Of all the traditional Indian forms, Kathakali has received the greatest international attention, particularly from western theatre practitioners and theorists. Compared to forms like Yakshagana and Therukuttu, Kathakali, appears as a ‘hard’ form more intent on maintaining its ‘tradition’, even though the performative contexts and the composition of the spectators are undergoing a sea change, in the contemporary context.

Instead of focusing attention on the ‘grammar’ and communicative process of Kathakali – like the *mudras* (gestures), costume and make-up structure or the process of acting (which have attracted the attention of western theatre activists), the present study will focus attention on the socio-political, cultural compulsions and contestations of the past which led to the emergence of Kathakali. It will also focus on how the ‘tradition’ of Kathakali grew and developed changing over a period of two hundred years after its origin; how it faced a period of crisis in the early part of 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the social conditions that had nurtured this form, underwent a radical change; how at the present time, different forces are rescribing the form as a response to the challenges of modernity. It will also focus on how the western interest in Kathakali, is redefining the form in subtle ways at the present juncture.

Kathakali has gained recognition as one of the classical dance forms of India. In fact, along with Bharata Natyam, it was one of the earliest forms, to undergo the process of revivalism in the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, and be recognized as part of the great Indian tradition of performing arts. This has prompted many scholars and critics to consider Kathakali as an epiphenomenon, relating it directly to the pan Indian Sanskritic tradition

rather than to the social, political compulsions of Malayalam society. Appu Kuttan Nair and K. Ayyappa Panikker for example call Kathakali, “The art of the non-worldly” (1993). But can any art form be ‘nonworldly’—totally divorced from the social, economic concerns of the society that has nurtured it. Padmanabhan Tampi quoting C.A. Menon points out, “It is a mistake to regard Kathakali as an isolated phenomenon divorced from its social, historical background... the Nairs and Namboodiris, the two leading communities of Malabar and their special characteristics have gone into the making of Kathakali as an art” (1963, 4). Before analyzing the contemporary pulls, and contestations that are redefining the form, let us have a look at the origin and evolution of Kathakali over the centuries.

## ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT

Unlike most other performing arts of India about whose origin not much is known, Kathakali’s origin and subsequent development have been clearly recognised. Ramanattam was created by Kottarakara Thampuran, the regional king of Kottarakara in 1661.<sup>1</sup> Legend has it that he requested the Raja of Calicut to send the Krishnattam troupe to his court. Manaveda Raja, a scion of the Zamorin family of Calicut, had created Krishnattam around 1650, basing it on Jayadeva’s *Gita Govinda* and *Ashtapadiattam*, a lyrical form which depicted the early life of *Krishna*. The Raja refused the request of the king of Kottarakara, saying that there were no scholars in Kottarakara’s court, who could appreciate the beauty and literary qualities of Krishnattam. Stung to the deep, Kottarakara is said to have created a cycle of plays based on the life of Rama, Ramanattam. In course of time, specially with the addition of *attakathas* (playscripts) based on *The Mahabharata*, the form came to be known as Kathakali.

This does not mean that Kathakali emerged out of nowhere suddenly in the middle of 17<sup>th</sup> century. Kerala has a long history and a variety of performing arts. Kerala in the beginning centuries of Christian era was a part of *Tamilagam*. The great Tamil epic *Silappadikaram* was written in an area that is now in the central part of Kerala. This epic has many references to dancing and performance. There also existed many ritualistic dance performing genres like *Patayani*, *Tirayattu*, *Mutiettu*, *Ottam Tullal* and *Kolam Tullal*. Many of these were related to the worship of Bhagavati or her Aryanised version, Kali. The

early literature of Kerala was written in a highly Sanskritised Malayalam called *Manipravalam* (lit. pearl + coral). This also points to the strong intermingling of Aryan and local Dravidian elements.

Perhaps the best example of the result of this intermingling leading to a new creativity, can be seen in Kudiattam, the only surviving form of Sanskrit theatre in India now. The exact details of its origin are not known, but by 10<sup>th</sup> century A.D. it was already in an advanced stage of development (Farley, 1990, 88). It is an elaborate performance of Sanskrit Drama on temple stage by the performing castes, Chakyar (male) and Nangyar (female). The actors recite the verse and represent the words through gestures and *abhinaya* with emphasis on *netrabhinaya* (lit. eye acting). The local flavour was added by the *vidushaka*, who spoke in Malayalam. Pointing out how much Kathakali owes to this form, Govindan Kutty says, “In the field of Abhinaya, hand gestures, make-up and dress, it is this dance form which can be called the true forebearer of Kathakali” (1999, 2).

Two other related forms are Chakyar Koothu and Mohini Attam. Chakyar Koothu is a solo narrative form, where stories from the epics and scriptures are narrated. After reciting the verse in Sanskrit, the explanations would be given in Malayalam by the performer. Another form performed only by women was Mohini Attam. This has now gained popularity as a solo dance form.

For all its ancestry and long unbroken tradition, Kudiattam was facing a very uncertain future in the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the social, ritualistic conditions under which the form had existed changed radically, as is made clear by Madhava Chakyar, a great exponent of Kudiattam in his foreword to a book by G. Venu (himself a leading artist now):

During the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, the prevalent arrangement to conserve temple arts that had survived so long, ran into rough weather. It was a time when there were changes in the political, social, cultural climate that led to a general attitude and thinking that announced the death of Sanskrit and in such circumstances maintained that an art form like Kudiattam was irrelevant. The *Koothambalam* that used to overflow with the audience became a thing of the past. The income from the temples for the performance was reduced to a pittance. The life and breath of art faced a moment of great crisis. Our younger generation started exploring other avenues to earn a living. Chakyars like us who did not know any other avenues to live were wondering what next?” (Venu, 2005, Foreword).

This touching statement goes to show how the existence of art forms is conditioned by a host of forces outside the form. When these contexts of performance (including the important question of patronage) are destabilised, the art form also becomes destabilised. In such cases, it either finds new contexts of performance (and a new patronage) or the form faces the danger of extinction.

Kudiattam and the related forms, have faced the challenge and have been able to redefine themselves, in the changed, changing contexts. It has now been recognised by UNESCO as “one of the masterpieces of oral and intangible heritage of Humanity”. There has also been a revivalistic trend in protecting this rare tradition and according to K.G. Paulose, there are five troupes performing this form now (personal interview). It has also become an important part of ‘cultural tourism’, specially for western tourists visiting Kerala.

Some other forms have also influenced the emergence of Kathakali. Among them, in terms of body postures, training schedules, massage of the body to make it supple etc., the most influential has been Kalaripayattu, the martial art of Kerala. This perhaps was natural because the Nairs were the martial caste of Kerala, who got trained in the *kalari* (gymnasium). In Kathakali, Nairs became the artists and the training of the body they had undergone, was put to prominent use in Kathakali. As Balakrishnan points out, “The basic postures, steps and body movements (of Kathakali) can be found in the martial art of Kerala, Kalaripiattu” (204, 4). Another ritualistic form, Teyyam has also left its imprint on Kathakali.

Though Kathakali as a form, emerged only in the seventeenth century, elements of all the forms mentioned above have gone into the making of this form. But the immediate impetus, as noted earlier, was from Krishnattam. King Manaveda of Calicut composed a cycle of eight plays, depicting the entire life of Krishna. These were and are performed on eight consecutive nights in the Krishna temple at Guruvayur. For the first time, a variety of characters were presented and these were differentiated by the costume types. It also made use of steps and body movements of Kalaripayattu. Masks were also used for some characters. As Venu says, this was, “one step forward in the evolution of the dance-drama form in Kerala” (1999, 3). But the language used was Sanskrit and it was performed only in the precincts of the temple, where only the upper castes were permitted to enter.

Ramanattam, created by Kottarakara Thampuran (1625–85) broke away from the earlier traditions in very important ways. One was the shift of language, from Sanskrit to Malayalam. The performances were held outside the temple precincts and so were open to all four (nonpolluting) castes. With this development, the performance became accessible to the majority of the people and naturally became very popular. Over the next few decades, Ramanattam's popularity spread to other parts of Kerala as well.

Another major stage in the development of Kathakali, took place when Kottayam Thampuran (1645–1716) another ruling prince of the time, wrote four plays based on the *Mahabharata*. According to Nair Appu Kuttan D. and K. Ayyappa Panikker, "They are considered the high watermark of *attakatha* literature" (1993, 20). This not merely expanded the thematic variety, but the name of the form also changed from Ramanattm to Kathakali (lit. story play). In course of time, several other changes also took place—blue colour of the make-up for heroic characters was changed to green (*pacha*), the addition of *chenda* percussion, the wearing of large bulbous skirt, the application of *chutti* (white extended border around the chin, made of rice paste) etc., came into vogue.<sup>2</sup> Another important shift that had taken place in Ramanattam itself was that the actor was freed from the task of singing. This was assigned to two specialised singers. The actor now communicated only through gestures and body language. The stage presentation also began to achieve the quality of slow elaboration.

All this goes to show how the tradition of Kathakali has evolved and emerged over the years drawing upon earlier forms and also by adding new elements. Traditions are never static or frozen but are always undergoing a process of change, where new elements are added and some left out. A whole range of forces, aesthetic, social, political, etc. will be shaping and conditioning these changes.

## SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

The emergence of a new form like Kathakali has to be understood by situating the need for such an emergence in the sociopolitical context. In the seventeenth century, Kerala was divided into a number of principalities and small kingdoms. The society was very strictly stratified along caste lines, with the Brahmin Namboodiris occupying the highest position. It is not very clear

when these Brahmins came to Kerala, but they brought with them the rich heritage of Sanskrit. They also became rich landlords. According to one estimate, the caste system got crystallised in Kerala society around 8–9 century A.D. (K.G. Paulose, Personal interview). The caste system was not only more rigid in Kerala, but it had developed a web of interrelations between one caste and another that was very unique.

The Nairs were the martial caste, and they were the most powerful community next to the Brahmins. They took great pride in their capacity in battle and kept themselves fit by training in the *kalari*. There are many ballads that glorify the heroism and adventure of this martial clan. The Nairs were the arm that implemented the hold of Namboodiris over the rest of the society. There was no clash of interest between Nairs and Namboodiris because of a unique familial system, as indicated by Bharata Iyer:

The rise of the Nayar into a military caste is from a historical point of view the return to power of the indigenous element, but this in no way resulted in a conflict with the Brahmins of Kerala (called Nambutiris) who have ever remained first citizens and leaders of society. The Nambutiris have long been subject to the social custom which required that only the eldest male member of the family ...should marry within the caste. The others married Nayar women. This long established practice drew the powerful Nayar caste into intimate social relationship with the Nambutiris and altogether eliminated every chance of conflict between the two (1955, 5).

It is important to note here that the Nairs and Namboodiris have played a decisive role in defining the form of Kathakali. But by the middle of seventeenth century, the Europeans like the Portuguese and the Dutch were already well entrenched in Kerala. The political situation had also changed as a result of which the Nairs could not show their prowess on the battle field. As such, the preconceived uniqueness and identity of the martial class as well as of the kings and princes was at stake. Philips Zarelli points out how the valour of the battle field was transplanted on to Kathakali.

The morale and honour of these leaders (kings of principalities) and their warriors, traditionally won on the field of battle, was slowly disintegrating with the continuous encroachment of European foreign powers. That honour and morale, on the wane by the end of 17<sup>th</sup> century, could be displaced from the field of battle and captured on the stage (1984, 51).

This perhaps explains why emotions like *vira* (heroic) and *raudra* (furious) dominate the discourse of Kathakali. It also demonstrates how aesthetic, cultural forms are not divorced from the quotidian concerns of the participants – artists, patrons and spectators; instead they become expressive vehicles of these concerns. But such expression may take deep symbolic forms. Specially with the passage of time, these symbolically embedded significances may not be apparent.

The Aryan influence came to Kerala through the Brahmins, in the form of knowledge embedded in Sanskrit as well as the deities of the Aryan Pantheon. At the same time, the Dravidian elements are also strongly present in the form of local deities, rituals and specially dance forms, some with fantastic costumes, masks or make-up. Kathakali is the result of an artistic integration of these two elements. If the make-up, costume and body postures are drawn from the local culture, the pan-Indian themes, and *Shastra*-theoretical postulates regarding acting, gestures, *rasa*, *bhava* concepts have all come from Sanskrit. The interaction between the two streams has resulted in a fertile creativity instead of a destructive confrontation. Commenting on how the concept of national theatre merged with the local elements to create the Kerala Sanskrit theatre of Kudiattam, K.G. Paulose, who has written extensively on the form, says “The national stream has merged with the indigenous practices of Kerala. Thus what we have today is an amalgam of different streams. Kudiattam is like a wall clock; the classical face apparently frozen, is drawn from the national pattern; while the organic part, the moving pendulum inhales life from its surroundings” (2006, Preface).

The indigenous elements are more strongly present in Kathakali though the conceptual foundations of national Sanskrit theatre have shaped this form. This assertion of the pan Indian discourse can be recognised even in the choice of themes. Kathakali (like Krishnattam and Kudiattam) deals only with the stories from the great epics or with the Aryan Brahminical pantheon. The myths regarding the local deities or legends regarding local folk heroes are never dealt with in Kathakali. Look at the following comment by K.R. Pisharoti. “The plot of the story is generally taken from that inexhaustible storehouse of Hindu mythology, the venerable Epics. It is to be regretted that no local heroes are dramatized, even though there were indeed a number of them, at that time at least, who achieved the highest eminence on account of the coming of the Portuguese and the consequent series of battles” (1955, 181).



This choice of subject matter can be associated with the process of acculturation, where the Aryan Brahminical pantheon gained precedence over the local deities; the Brahminical rituals became more respectable than local cult practices. This process can be related to the position of Namboodiri Brahmins in Kerala society. Thus Kathakali became an expressive vehicle for the religion of the 'great tradition' as opposed to the 'little tradition' (to use Robert Redfield and Milton Singer's terms).

### *Expression of Male Ethos*

Kathakali is an all male domain where even female roles are played by men. This stands in contrast to forms like Kudiattam which had women performers as well. Compared to the gorgeous costumes and non-realistic make-up of leading male characters, the female characters wear simple costumes and make-up. Among the emotional states, *vira* and *raudra* are the dominant ones as we have observed earlier. The episodes depicted also deal predominantly with battle and killing. Some gory scenes like Bhima killing Dushasana and drawing out his entrails are considered highlights of the performance.

All these elements together, function symbolically in projecting and asserting the male ethos. The male oriented nature of Kathakali can be better understood if we compare it with another form of Kerala, like Mohini Attam (performed by women) which lays emphasis on the expression of grace and erotic emotions through dance. What was the need for such an assertion of male pride and ethos? Manjushri and Parbati Sircar, view it in relation to the matrilineal society among Nairs:

Thus the birth of Kathakali may be considered very significant in relation to the prevailing social exigency. The Nairs were losing their glorious status in the community and the dance theatre was one way to channelise the ethos of their masculine pride. In a matrilineal society, the absence of a male physiological priority in the lineage system, masculine pride perhaps needed to be affirmed.

The selection of heroic themes for Kathakali's dance dramas probably reflects the need of the performers to assert the male ethos. Kathakali is violent, acrobatic and athletic. The Nairs chose the themes from the mythological past and not from the historical past, to create a supernatural aura of ritual dancing... In contrast with the male character, the female character (played by young males) is presented

in an exceedingly simple way without any elaborate costume or make-up (1982, 158).

The issues analysed above, clearly point out how the emergence of a 'new' form like Kathakali, was the result of the fruition of several factors, cultural, familial, social and political. No form of cultural expression, including performance exists in a vacuum. It is always situated and performed in a social context which is conditioned by conflicting urges and contestations. The art form may express these, either at the manifest level of the discourse (as is often the case in modern theatre) or as a deeply subliminal symbolic discourse, which is most often the case in traditional forms with a fairly long history. But for that reason, we can not consider these forms as an epiphenomenon, that exists apart from the social, political, economic and even philosophical selves of the performers (including the patrons and spectators); nor can we consider it 'nonworldly', cut off from our everyday concerns. Forms like these come to be accepted by the community at large only when they fulfil certain deep emotional, psychological, aesthetic needs.

## THE PROCESS OF DEVELOPMENT

### *The heydays*

After its emergence from Ramanattam to Kathakali, the art form went on refining and redefining itself during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Though there were periods of upheaval, it survived largely on the patronage of different kings. The artistic inputs were provided by the Namboodiri scholars, and the Nair artists. This process of refinement and subtle innovations were also by and large, a process of Sanskritisation, where the changes were made in keeping with the Sanskrit treatises like Bharata's *Natya Shastra* and *Hasta Lakshana Deepika* (which was written during the evolutionary stage of Kudiattam).<sup>3</sup> In this section, a brief study will be made of this process of development, along with the role played by the patrons and connoisseurs (who themselves had a major role in this process), the developments of different styles within Kathakali, etc.

This process of change, within Kathakali demonstrates how, what we perceive as tradition is never a static or frozen, but goes on emerging and changing. These changes are usually subtle and mostly emerging from within

the form and so will not appear like a rupture. Such a state is possible when the society where the form functions, remains comparatively stable. But when the social conditions undergo a period of convulsion, the form also becomes 'destabilised'. Then it will either have to redefine itself, in order to survive and retain its relevance in the changed sociopolitical situation or become 'frozen', a kind of a museum piece. Kathakali also faced such a situation in the beginning decades of twentieth century. How the form reemerged from such a crisis, will be dealt with in the last part of this chapter.

*The role of patrons and connoisseurs*

As we observed earlier, with the shift from Sanskrit to Malayalam, and the performance space from inside the temple to the courtyard of the temple or the patron's house, Kathakali became accessible to the vast majority of the population. But in nurturing and grooming the form, the control was firmly in the hands of the upper echelons of society – the kings and princes, the Namboodiri Brahmins and the Nair chieftains.

We have already observed how king Zamorin of Calicut and Raja of Kottarakara (1625–1685 A.D.) were directly responsible for the emergence of Krishnattam and Ramanattam. The Raja of Kottayam (1665–1743 A.D.), by authoring four plays based on *Mahabharata*, directly paved the way for *Kathakali*. It is also believed that he was an accomplished actor (Tampy, 1963, 2). Many of the kings of different principalities, not merely continued the patronage, but also wrote many Kathakali scripts themselves. Kartika Tirunal, the Maharaja of Travancore, was a great composer of songs and wrote seven plays of which, some like *Narakasura Vadham* are popular even today. He also wrote the treatise on dance *Balarama Bharatam*. His nephew, prince Aswati wrote four plays. Swathi Tirunal was more interested in music but continued the patronage. He also composed several *padams* for Kathakali. There were many other writers, who were not of royal lineage, though some were court poets. Among them the most important ones are Unnayi Varier (1735–1785) who composed four plays on the story of Nala (*Nala Charitam*) and Irayimman Tampi (1783–1858). These plays have become part of Kathakali's repertory and are regularly performed even today.

This royal patronage was not merely a result of their aesthetic interests but was also related to their religious leanings, where the Vaishnavite influence

was spreading over Kerala. So, the themes of these plays dealt with the incarnations of Vishnu (Rama, Krishna). This can be viewed as an instrument of spreading the 'great tradition' – the pan Indian epics, their value system, world view, social structuration, etc. among the masses. It is also related to the medieval South Indian concept of the King who is equated with the deity. Patronage of the arts was also one of the ways of asserting and establishing the authority and position of the patron (Bapat, 1998, 195–197). Such an assertion perhaps became necessary, when the temporal power was increasingly coming under threat not merely by the European colonial powers but also by the kings of Mysore, Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan, specially in northern Kerala.

This process of patronage spread to the Namboodiris also, who were not merely great Sanskrit scholars, with cultivated aesthetic tastes, but also big landlords who could afford to become patrons. Along with being patrons, they also played the role of *rasika*, or connoisseur, who had the knowledge and the aesthetic ability to comment on the performance. Apart from the performers themselves, these *rasikas* played a prominent role in shaping Kathakali. The performing troupes (called *Kaliyogams*) were normally rooted at one place because of such patronage and so there was scope for constant interaction between the artists and the *rasikas*. It was the task of these connoisseurs to decide on what was appropriate or inappropriate in the performance. Any innovation attempted by the artists would be put to the acid test of the connoisseurs' approval or disapproval. Thus they also played a major role in shaping Kathakali.

In addition, as the Namboodiris were well versed in the Sanskritic *Shastras*, they also acted as a conduit for the flow of such classical norms into Kathakali. This not merely facilitated the process of aesthetic refinement, but also led to greater Sanskritisation. As a result of such a development, there was greater codification in the communicative process, in aspects like character categories, like *Pacha* (green), *tadi* (bread), *katti* (knife), *minukku* (shining), etc.; in the use of hand gestures; in *abhinaya* and in many other aspects. But in spite of such sophistication, its appeal to the larger public was not reduced, because they also shared knowledge of these codes, through constant exposure. Thus the continued patronage of the princes and connoisseurs, gave Kathakali the unique distinction of being courtly and at the same time a popular art. As Bharata Iyer says, "It not only remained at the temples and courts but traveled

all over the highways and byeways, from village to village and house to house gaining in course of time, the distinction of a national art. It is an art that remains in the highest sense, for the people" (1955, 22).

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which were also the formative years for Kathakali, were also periods of political and military conflict in Kerala. The colonial European powers were in constant conflict with the local rulers and were becoming well entrenched. The rulers of northern part of Kerala were vanquished by the Mysore rulers, Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan. As a result, there was great upheaval and displacement. Tipu was defeated by the British in 1792, when the landlords and royal families were allowed to return, but with only nominal powers, under the suzerainty of the British.

In such a turbulent period, it was but natural that one of the chief concerns of Kathakali, during its formative years, was the valorisation of violence and war in the cause of *dharma*, as has been analysed earlier. Another related concern was exploring the nature of 'the heroic', as is pointed out by Philip Zarelli. He says:

Given the vagaries and bellicosity of the exercise of power in medieval Kerala, it is not surprising that one of the central anxieties and concerns for Kathakali's ruling land holding patron-connoisseurs was that of exploring the nature of 'the heroic... [the] heroic state is embodied by Kathakali's 'green' (pacca) make-up type—a class of characters which reflects this character's basic moral uprightness, inner refinement and calm inner poise... whose task as a Ksatriya is to uphold *dharma*... Kathakali plays become arenas for playing out and reflecting the existential dilemmas that confront not only these epic heroes as they attempt to fulfil their duty, but also their every day counterparts – The Nayars, Ksatriyas and Namboodiris—by whom and for whom the performances were created. (2000, 23–24).

This perceptive comment succinctly brings out how the 'aesthetic' concerns of Kathakali, were deeply conditioned by the sociopolitical exigencies, other than being a mere 'theatre of the mind'.

### *The Process of Change*

We have already observed how, in its process of emergence from Ramanattam to Kathakali, several far reaching changes were introduced like changing the base colour of make-up from blue to green, crowns which had codified

categories, replacing masks with elaborate make-up, etc.

As the playscripts became more literary, with emphasis on the expression of different emotional states (as defined in Sanskritic *rasa* theory), other innovations also followed. It is said that Kottayam Tampuran, in collaboration with his artists, introduced new *ragas*, increased the variety of rhythmic patterns, primarily the slow tempo, which facilitated the elaboration of *bhavas* (Zarelli, 2000, 24). We have already observed how, the singing had shifted from the actors to the singers. The actor was now free to elaborate on the content of the song through *abhinaya* and the use of hand gestures. The use of the singers and the introduction of *Chenda*, the percussion instrument, were the innovations of Vettathu Thampuran (Pandeya, 1943, 37).

Kaplingattu Namboodiri, by the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century, expanded the use of *mudras*, drawing from the Sanskritic tradition. Plays written during this period, centred round anti-heroes like Ravana and Narakasura (*Katti-* knife characters). There also grew the system of slow elaboration and certain innovative interludes, like the peacock dance, or the same actor representing several different ‘signifieds’, etc. (*pakarnattam*) came into vogue. The emphasis began to shift to subtle expression of psychological states of characters, through Kathakali’s grammar of *abhinaya*. All these innovations were attempted by the mature artists. Those innovations that received the approval of the patrons and connoisseurs became part of tradition, to be taught and handed over to the next generation of artists, who would add their own contributions to the running flow of tradition.

### *Different styles*

As a result of such innovations, different streams developed within the tradition of Kathakali. These different styles or schools were quite often geographical in their spread, representing different areas, but they emerged mainly due to the creative efforts and contributions of certain individual artists.

By the middle of nineteenth century, a number of distinctive styles had emerged within Kathakali. This period is also considered the zenith of Kathakali, by many scholars. Zarelli points out how the emergence to different schools or styles is a mark of the form attaining a stage of maturity. He says, “One of the hallmarks of the crystallization of a tradition or genre of

performance is the development of distinctive ‘styles’ or lineages of interpretation, practice and performance” (2000, 26). Though a number of different styles emerged, each laying emphasis on particular aspects and drawing inspiration from different sources, in course of time, some of them merged leading to other composite styles.

Balakrishnan mentions three styles and their distinctive features. Kalladikkodan style of North Malabar, followed the strict *natya dharmi*, (stylised, symbolic) approach, with emphasis on traditional *kalasams* (interludes, indicated by pure dance). Kaplingadan style was evolved by the creative inputs of Namboodiri patrons who rarely became performers themselves. The emphasis was more on drama than on dance with prominent use of *loka dharmi* (drawn from real life). Its main features were the curtain appearance (*tirunokku*) and the actor becoming a sign representing several signifieds (*pakarnattam*). Balakrishnan concludes that ‘the future of this style is bleak’ and says, “Lack of Patronage has taken its toll and now few troupes are left. There are a few *gurus* well into their seventies who still teach this style with little support” (2004, 84). The third style mentioned by him is the Kalluvazi style which lays emphasis on polish and improvisation paying special attention to stylisation in acting and dance.<sup>4</sup>

Some scholars are of the opinion that Kalluvazi style was a composite style that emerged by fusing elements of the above two styles (Zarelli, 2000, 26). It is said to have been evolved under the patronage of a Namboodiri Brahmin around 1850 by Unniri Panikkar.<sup>5</sup> Through Pattikantodi Ramunni Menon, this style entered Kerala Kalamandalam and has now become the dominant style in Kathakali.

Another style is the Kidangoor style which developed under royal patronage in Travancore in the southern part of Kerala. The emphasis in this style is on the slow exposition of *bhava* leading to the evocation of the *rasa* in the spectators. For this, it has drawn inspiration from Kudiattam.

Anyhow at present, due to mutual influence and the merging of different styles, only two broad styles can be recognised as pointed out by V. Kaladharan of Kerala Kalamandalam. The northern style which draws heavily from the martial arts, the emphasis falls on precise movements, dance steps and body postures. In the southern style on the other hand, the emphasis is on *abhinaya* – histrionics and on the development of the narrative. The actor has a greater freedom as to the body movements (Kaladharan, personal interview).

This variety in style and representation is proof of the fact that changes and innovations went on taking place within the received tradition. But the parameters were fixed within which only these changes were attempted or accepted.

But when social institutions like feudal land ownership or the familial structure is destabilised, the cultural forms, that depended on these institutions, specially for patronage and viewership also get destabilised. The form faces a period of crisis when the old systems cease to function. There arises an urgent need to redefine the form going beyond the parameters mentioned earlier, in order to retain its relevance in the changed / changing circumstances. How Kathakali faced such a crisis and how it negotiated with the new challenges is analysed next.

## PERIOD OF CRISIS

If the first half of nineteenth century is considered as the zenith of Kathakali, the last few decades of that century as well as early decades of twentieth century can be considered the period of crisis, when a host of factors led to the destabilisation of the traditional contexts of performance.

Successive kings after Uthram Tirunal did not take the same interest in patronising Kathakali. As a result, after a long period of royal patronage, the troupe was restricted to giving a limited number of performances in the temples.

Another important reason was the splitting of big landholdings. In the traditional system of inheritance, among the Namboodiris, it was only the eldest son who inherited the land and so it was not split into small holdings. The changed situation is indicated in the following statement. "Points of conflict and confrontation is property. The property of the Nambuthri is called *Brahmaswam*. Earlier it was the eldest son who could inherit and maintain it. But now a days property is shared equally among all children" (People of India, XXVII, 1080). Successive acts like Travancore Malayala Brahmana Act III – 1106, Madras Namboodiri Act 1932, and finally the Hindu Succession Act of 1956, severely undermined the position of the *tharavadu* or the joint family. As a result, many patrons lost the economic wherewithal to continue the patronage of Kathakali troupes.

After the spread of British power, large parts of Kerala came under their



suzerainty. With the spread of English education, the ‘colonised mindset’ developed among the educated class, who began to treat their own culture as inferior and crude. Kathakali also became a prey to such an attitude. This only added to the overall atmosphere of neglect.

Another reason also perhaps needs to be mentioned here. Kerala as we have observed, had a very rigid caste structure with some features that were unique to that land. At the end of nineteenth century, and beginning of twentieth century, there started social movements that began to question the hegemony of the upper castes. Narayana Guru (1854–1926) for example, began to work for the upliftment of many downtrodden communities, specially the Ezhavas and Tiyaas. Traditional familial systems like *Sambandham* (lit. alliance – where a Namboodiri man took a Nair woman as wife), and *marimakkuttayam* (matrilineality) began to be questioned as unsuited for a modern society<sup>6</sup>. The Nair Service Society, started in 1914, also began to work for the reformation of the Nairs. As a result of all these social, legal, political developments, the foundations on which Kathakali had grown and prospered were severely shaken. As the Namboodiris and Nairs – the caste groups at the top of the hierarchy – were most closely associated with Kathakali, the other caste groups lower down the hierarchy perhaps began to perceive this form as part of and expressive of that hegemony.

Another important reason for the decreasing interest in Kathakali, specially in Southern Kerala must also be mentioned. Years from 1930s to 40s were the period of the growth of the Communist movement in Kerala. This was also the period of several agrarian movements. The Communist movements organised the landless labourers and their struggle was against the feudal forces represented by the upper caste groups like the Namboodiri and the Nairs. As these were the castes most closely associated with Kathakali (and other classical forms), the art form was also perceived as representing the feudal value system and world view. In addition the communists started Kerala People’s Arts Club and began performing plays that directly projected the problems faced by the agricultural labourers. Plays like *Patta Baki* by K. Damodaran and plays by Topil Basi became very popular. The performers in these plays were also from amongst the agricultural labourers themselves. As a result, the cultural space that was earlier occupied by Kathakali and other traditional forms, was now taken over by these drama troupes. This social, political movement, accelerated the decreasing interest in Kathakali.

The cumulative result of all these developments was that Kathakali faced a period of crisis in the beginning decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century, with its existence itself being under threat. Commenting on the changed socioeconomic situation and its impact on Kathakali, Chitra Panikkar says, “This disrupted the functioning of the *Kaliyogams* (troupes) and drove the Kathakali artiste to the streets where, knowing no other profession, he was reduced to sheer penury” (1993, 38).

## MODERN FORMS OF PATRONAGE–NEW INSTITUTIONS

### *Kerala Kalamandalam*

In such a period of crisis, there came on the scene, the famous Malayalam poet, Vallathol Narayana Menon, a great lover of Kathakali. Realising the need for new forms of intervention, when the old, traditional forms of patronage were breaking down, he started Kerala Kalamandalam, in 1930, along with like minded friends like Mukunda Raja. It had a modest beginning with only five students. But he was able to bring together, the greatest artists of the period like P. Ramunni Menon, Kunju Kurup, K. Narayanan Nair as well as singers and instrumentalists. In spite of the initial difficulties in raising funds, he was able to provide an institutional framework for the rigorous training required for Kathakali. Unobtrusively, the old *gurukula* system had given way to an institutional format. Soon it was shifted to Cherutturutti, near Shoranur, where it is now functioning on a sprawling campus. In 1941, it was taken over by the state and has now been declared a deemed university.

Along with starting Kerala Kalamandalam, Vallathol also had the vision to realise that a revival of the form depended on rekindling an interest in the form both inside Kerala and outside. He decided to project it (not consciously perhaps), in the words of Zarelli, “at a local level among Malayalis as a marker of their identity, at a ‘national’ level as a marker of a distinctively Indian national identity, and at an international level by gaining recognition for Kathakali as one ‘classical’ art among the world’s great classical arts” (2000, 31). This effort by Vallathol can be related to similar ‘revivalistic’ efforts taking place in different performing arts of India, by persons like Rukmini Devi Arundel, Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya and others. These efforts that began in pre-independent India, can be seen as part of the effort of projecting a national tradition in opposition to the colonial discourse.

It was only natural that such attempts took the form of revivalism, in trying to protect and purify the art forms, from conceived notions of corruption and neglect. Such a notion of national culture, may have had its utility under colonialism, it becomes a problematic construct in post-independent India not merely because it flattens the vast diversity of the land but also because it disassociates the cultural form from its sociocultural moorings. Commenting on such an approach in the study of Indian theatre, Nandi Bhatia says, "... the attempt to identify a 'national' canon of theatre can be seen as a decolonising gesture that seeks to establish an autonomous and 'authentic' identity under colonialism and in the wake of independence, such a move inevitably reinvents the past in ways that erase tensions and fissures of the post-colonial nation" (Nandi Bhatia, 2007, 1188). Issues like these are now being debated in relation to broad categories and concepts like 'national culture'.

After periods of uncertainty under government administration, Kerala Kalamandalam has now become a deemed university. It has a student strength of 440, who study other forms also like Kudiattam, Bharata Natyam, Mohini Attam, etc. As a pointer to the changing caste configuration of Kathakali artists, there are now (2007-08) 60 students who belong to S.C., S.T. category. Students are admitted after 7<sup>th</sup> standard. Along with training in the art forms, they are also taught general education so that after eight years of learning, they are awarded B.A. degree. There are a number of students from other countries as well. In keeping with the demand for cultural tourism, Kalamandalam has started a programme called 'A Day with the Masters' where tourists spend a day watching a short performance, visit the classes, etc. This programme has become popular among foreign tourists.

Vallathol also took the Kathakali troupe on a tour not merely to other parts of India, but also to other countries, which greatly helped in bringing this form to the attention of the rest of India and the world. But unlike Shivarama Karanth, who took an active role in shaping the artistic product of Yaksharanga (as we have observed earlier), Vallathol, engaged himself only in organisational matters, leaving the artistic control to the artists themselves.

#### *Other Institutions*

Though the *Kaliyogams* organised by patrons and princes became a thing of

the past, new organisations took their place. Apart from Kerala Kalamandalam, P.S.V. Natyasangham was started in 1939 by the famous Ayurvedic medicine manufacturing firm at Kottakal. Support from the industry also came when the F.A.C.T. Kathakali school was started in Udyogamandal in 1965. A private effort in the same direction was Unnayi Warriar Smaraka Kalanilayam. Two other such efforts are Sadanam at Ottupala and the one at Irinjalakuda run by the famous artist Venu.

Among such efforts Margi of Trivandrum, has charted its own unique identity. It was started in 1970, and in the beginning was engaged only in arranging programmes of classical music and theatre arts. The Kathakali centre was started in 1974 and later the famed artist Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair became the teacher. Margi tries to retain the old *gurukula* system. It also tries to recreate the old tradition of slow elaboration of the subtleties of the text through acting and the interaction of the artists and *sahradaya*-connoisseur, as it existed in the olden days. It considers the art form as non-worldly, cut off from the mundane considerations as can be perceived from the following description of Kathakali in its website. “The vision of the mundane world having been cut out by the darkness of the night, the blaze from the huge solitary bronze lamp takes you to a new world of mystic vision; the worldly sounds gradually fade out as the human activities of the day gradually grind to a halt. A new world is created... you are strictly within the confines of an illusory atmosphere” (<http://www.margitheatre.org/kathakali.html>).

In construing Kathakali only as an aesthetic experience and as transcendental and non-worldly, Margi is trying to reconstruct what it considers the traditional mode of Kathakali’s appreciation. Margi’s performances are also targeted to ‘the connoisseurs for whom the performances of Margi are primarily staged’ (Chitra Panikkar, 1993, 43). This shows how Kathakali becomes a contested territory, with the opposite forces of tradition and modernity trying to redefine it in different ways. Margi’s approach tries to project the ideal spectator as a *sahradaya* and *samana hradaya* (ibid, 5) but overlooks the historical, political positioning of such a spectator as Zarelli points out :

It is crucial to remember that the principles of ‘appropriateness’ and developing a ‘theatre of the mind’ guiding Margi reflect the ideal experience and spectatorial practices of today’s educated connoisseur, and that they are therefore not

‘disinterested’ or ‘natural’ since they hide their historical construction (or reconstruction) and implicit privilege behind their elegant elaboration of a nondualistic, transcendental mode of reception/appreciation (2000, 36).

Another institution that has tried to extend the activities of Kathakali, beyond Kerala is International Centre for Kathakali in New Delhi. Started in 1960, it has been running a Kathakali school for Indian and foreign students apart from putting up regular performances, particularly in North India and abroad. Suitable changes like editing, performances of nontraditional themes, etc. are also performed specially for the nontraditional spectators.

Apart from these institutions, Kathakali clubs have now sprung up in almost all districts and big cities. If the artists are employed by the institutions mentioned above, individual artists are also sponsored by some others, pointing to a new system of patronage. Apart from all these new organisations and contexts the traditional performances are also held in the temples even now, though they are of a shorter duration (about three hours), unlike the all-night performances of the past.

All these changes indicate how Kathakali has adapted to the changing patronage pattern and composition of spectators. This change has brought about other fundamental changes, as is pointed out by Kaladharan. “Now it is public patronage and Kathakali has come into the democratic set up. Earlier it was the hegemony of the feudal patronage. Now the situation has changed with a democratic pattern cutting across barriers of class and caste... the religious content and ritualistic framework has definitely undergone a change” (personal interview).

Because of the changing viewership and performative contexts, full night performances are now being reduced to a shorter duration. Many elements that were part of the performance structure, are now omitted. Slow elaboration and improvisation that had gained prominence in the past, are now edited or left out. Modern devices like electric lights and sound amplification systems have brought about related changes. Emphasizing on the need for negotiating with the contemporary world, Kalamandalam Govindan Kutty, a senior artist who has been teaching Kathakali in Kolkata, says, “In today’s scientific age, side by side with traditional themes, more socially relevant and contemporary plots should be written and choreographed for Kathakali theatre. Costumes should also be suitably modified to match the current theme. I think that for the lovers of Kathakali who have an interest in its future, it is necessary for

them to recondition their minds in this direction” (1999, 61).

## OVERT FORMS OF CHANGE – EXPERIMENTATION

Though change is inevitable and keeps on occurring either consciously or unconsciously, the site of contestation within Kathakali is about the direction and nature of change. We have observed how when the traditional system of patronage was destabilised, due to sociopolitical convulsions, Kathakali was able to redefine itself and find new forms of patronage. With this change of patronage, other processes also followed. The change in the performative context and the composition of spectators, meant that the form had to redefine itself to the changed/ changing circumstances and audience expectations. But these shifts were not considered as destabilising the form, as they were considered changes from ‘within’, in order to confront the challenges of modernity.

But there have also been more overt expressions of change in the form of experimentation, both in content and in using elements of Kathakali in radically altered forms. Many such attempts have only remained experiments and have not become part of the perceived tradition. But at the same time, they have left their imprint on the form, in subtle and not so subtle ways.

Many modern Indian dancers have used elements of Kathakali, in creating new ballets. Udaya Shankar made use of many elements of Kathakali like its gestures and mimes in his ballet. The trend was continued by others like Mrinalini Sarabhai, Ram Gopal and others. Mrinalini Sarabhai used the techniques and body kinetics of Kathakali, but without the traditional costume in her production of *Manushya* (Kothari, 2006, 243). Shanta Rao has shown how even the ‘masculine’ aspects of Kathakali can be competently performed by women. Gopinath and Ragini Devi were among the earliest to adapt Kathakali to modern stage conditions (Massey, 2004, 117). Maya Rao made extensive use of Kathakali in her production of *Khol Do*, a stage adaptation of Sadat Hasan Manto’s story on partition. The much acclaimed film *Nirmalyam* by Vasudevan Nair and *Drishanta* by M.B. Sukumaran Nair have used Kathakali as a backdrop to the narratives. A recent film in Malayalam *Vanaprastam* by Shaji Karun centres round the life of a Kathakali dancer, who is the illegitimate son of a Namboodiri Brahmin. These were experiments that made use of Kathakali but did not create any intense debate in Kathakali circles as they

were considered as being located outside the Kathakali framework.

*New Texts – New Themes*

Kathakali as we have observed, deals with themes from the epics and *puranas*. When the form began to tune itself to modern times, it had to confront one crucial question: can more contemporary themes, not drawn from the canonical sources, be presented in Kathakali. New scripts have always been written and performed in its long history, but they were all based on the sources mentioned above. The question of Kathakali scripts and performances dealing with nontraditional themes, has been a hotly debated and contentious issue.

The first such experiment was attempted soon after the second world war and was inspired by Vallathol himself. It was on the theme of *The Killing of Hitler*. Another such attempt was *Gandhi's Victory*. Many more such attempts were tried by the International Centre for Kathakali in Delhi which included plays like *Buddha Charitam*, the one based on Mary Magdelene etc. Western themes such as *Iliad*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *Snow White* *The Bacche* (based on Euripedes' play) were also attempted. New costumes were also designed, nontraditional musical elements were added (S.P.V. Balakrishnan, 2005, 237). Among such experiments with nontraditional themes, the ones that led to the most heated debates were Kerala Kalamandalam's production of *King Lear* and two plays with a clearly Marxist orientation; *Manava Vijayam* (*People's Victory*) (1987) and *Message of Love* (1995) by Iyyamgode Sridharan.

Efforts such as these have led to a great deal of heated debate about what is appropriate and what not appropriate Kathakali. The last two plays had a clear Leftist message and the attempt was to turn Kathakali into a people's art from its feudal, elitist birth and growth. In such attempts we can see how Kathakali today has become a contested territory with differently positioned groups trying to control and redefine the form. Traditionalists would argue about the nonacceptability of such drastic break from what they perceive as the traditional format of Kathakali. V. Kaladharan of Kerala Kalamandalam, for example, says, "New texts are being written and experimented but basically Kathakali is enjoyed and exists because of the form rather than the content. It is very well structured and form is supreme. Whatever the theme, the form decides how it should be appreciated. Once you change the form, the whole

ambience of Kathakali is lost” (Personal interview). It is precisely the tensions between these opposite pulls, that are rescribing the present status of Kathakali—a remnant of the feudal past or a vibrant form of people’s art; an art form appreciated by the traditional viewers specially the *rasikas* or an art form of the masses; or as a form that can appeal to art lovers all over the world; an art form that appeals only because of its form or an art form that appeals because of its content (including the ritualistic content). Forces like these are redefining the form and are contesting as to who are the authorities to decide on the appropriateness or otherwise of the changes that are attempted in this form. After a detailed analysis of these ‘experimental’ productions and the debates that followed, Zarelli concludes, “In a post-modern, post-colonial world, our readings of non-western performance traditions like Kathakali must transcend the limitations of earlier narrowly defined genre-based studies which might accept at face value the hegemonic discourse of an aesthetic elite and their interpretation of their art as singular and natural” (2000, 205). Implicit in this comment, is the realisation that most western perceptions of Indian art forms are guided by ‘elitist’ interpretations within India, overlooking the fact that the tradition itself has now become a contested territory, where differently positioned groups play out the sociopolitical tensions.

We have seen in the previous chapter, how similar issues are being hotly debated in Yakshagana as well. But because Yakshagana has never been elitist and because it has now become commercially organised, such experiments have been more openly accepted than in Kathakali. Without going into the merit or demerit of these contrasting approaches, we can only say that they represent two different ways in which tradition is being understood and put to practice in these two art forms that have existed in neighbouring states.

## WESTERN PERSPECTIVE – ITS IMPACT

Of the multifarious forms of performance and theatre in India, the one form that has attracted the greatest attention in the west, is undoubtedly Kathakali (and perhaps Kudiattam). Ever since Alice Boner’s writings during 1930s, a host of western scholars and theatre practitioners have been attracted to Kathakali. Among them are important theatre personalities like Grotowsky, Eugene Barba and Richard Schechner. They have been specially fascinated



by the methods of training of the body and mind; its system of internalisation of the character, its objectification through the body, etc. They have also tried to use many of these aspects in their own theatre practices. Of all the Indian forms, Kathakali is the one form that has got the maximum exposure in the west. Starting from the first tour organised by Vallathol himself, innumerable troupes have performed in different parts of the world. A good number of foreign students are now studying Kathakali in the different centres.

Because of such an exposure, Kathakali has today become the most widely known Indian performing art outside India. Shambu Hegde the renowned Yakshagana artist, narrated an incident that took place in London recently, which amply demonstrates, Kathakali's popularity outside India. His troupe had gone to London, to take part in a festival. Their Yakshagana performance was followed by a Kathakali performance. Suddenly a host of T.V. Channels, journalists, etc. swooped down to cover the Kathakali performance. They had shown no interest in the other forms of India that were also presented in the festival. He added (with a touch of envy and disappointment perhaps) that other traditional forms of India, have not been able to gain the kind of international recognition and exposure that Kathakali has (personal interview).

This interest of the west in Kathakali has now given a boost to 'cultural tourism' as well. Tourism has increased by leaps and bounds in Kerala specially in the last two decades, with the government projecting the state as 'God's own country'. It has become an important destination for foreign tourists. Along with its beaches and landscape, two important attractions have been its traditional medicinal practices and its performing arts. Short performances of many forms including Kathakali are held in cities like Cochin and Trivandrum for these tourists in the form of 'cultural packages'. Even Kerala Kalamandalam runs a special programme 'A Day with the Masters' specially catering to the foreign tourists as mentioned earlier. All these developments have no doubt created new opportunities for Kathakali artists and the form has got an international exposure that it has never had before.

The crucial question to be asked is—how has this totally altered context of performance, affected/is affecting the form? The altered composition of spectatorship is itself a major rupture from the traditional setup. Any performance emerges only in the 'doing' of it, where the artists, spectators,

the context, all play a role in shaping the discourse.<sup>7</sup> How are these new situations modifying and restructuring Kathakali and the meanings that it generates. Questions like these need to be posited about the present status of Kathakali.

Many Indian scholars of theatre, like Rustom Bharucha and Ananda Lal have criticised western scholars' engagement only with traditional Indian performing arts and the experiments of interculturism and have called such an approach, another example of 'neocolonialism'. For example, commenting on how western theorists of theatre tend to decontextualise Indian performance traditions, Rustom Bharucha says, "I can not deny that this dominant tendency to dehistoricise Indian culture is the source of my discomfort with most intercultural theories of Indian theatre... it is worse when a traditional performance is stripped of its links to the lives of the people for whom it is performed. Nothing could be more disrespectful to theatre than to reduce its act of celebration to a repository of techniques and theories" (1993, 3-4). Questions like these become crucial specially in the present context, when culture is also getting increasingly globalized.

At the same time, a related question of equal importance, if not of greater immediacy, needs to be posited – what has been the impact of this exposure to foreign elements on the artists and on the form itself? How has this new situation changed and is changing Kathakali? This issue does not seem to have received much scholarly attention, though certain insights are found in the form of passing comments. Balakrishnan for example, makes the following guarded comment about such an impact. "Dance today has to address several issues brought in by multiculturalism and globalization... there are many practitioners, whose personal growth and development may have unobtrusively been conditioned by such atmosphere" (2004, 91).

There is no doubt that this development has brought in new spectators and has created new openings and opportunities for the artists. They are now in a position to earn more and it would be foolhardy to condemn such opportunities as mere 'culture tourism packages'. At the same time, what are the expectations of these new spectators who are unfamiliar with the conventions, the ritualistic framework and communicative processes of Kathakali? How has their desire to see on 'exotic' fare, as representative of 'the traditional art of Kerala' and of the third world, been conditioning the artists and their performance? One effect of this rupture in performative

context, is that Kathakali appears to be becoming more rigid. The effort seems to be to retain those aspects of performance that the spectators expect to witness. As a result, 'form' seems to have gained a precedence over the 'content'. Such a drive to make the form more and more classical, should not be at the cost of its vitality warns Sadanam Balakrishnan "... the current growing demand for 'classicism' should be taken in the correct perspective and be utilized to both preserve yet also to popularise this art form. Once the art becomes rigid or 'museumised', it loses its vitality" (2005, 272). The deritualised context also changes the meaning of the performance as a whole, points out Bharucha. "The practitioners of many traditional dances and rituals in India, no longer perform for the gods; they perform for tourists, research scholars and 'experts' (1990, 37).

At the same time, Kathakali continues to be performed in traditional performance spaces (in temples for example) and for the traditional spectators. This can act as a counter and a corrective to the influence of cultural tourism. Comparing the two performative contexts, Margi Vijayakumar, a leading artist, for example, says that he enjoys performing before traditional spectators as he can get the expected response (personal interview). The danger arises only when the traditional spectators begin to lose interest, which seems to be happening to some extent, specially among the younger generation. But so long as Kathakali continues to retain its relevance in the cultural ethos of the people, its future is assured. The form has the resilience to address itself to the divergent expectancies of both sets of spectators. It is in these drastically altered performative contexts, that the meaning of tradition and what it stands for, becomes a contested zone.

## PRESENT AND FUTURE

In this chapter, we have observed how the tradition of Kathakali emerged from Ramanattam and how it went on changing, modifying and growing over centuries. In the first few decades of twentieth century, it faced a period of great crisis, with the loss of traditional patronage, but was able to emerge out of that crisis and find new forms of patronage. All these changes have redefined and rescribed the form from the received tradition of the past.

The last few decades have been a period of great convulsion. New avenues and opportunities have arisen which are also destabilising the notion of a

fixed, immutable tradition. These forces are reshaping the tradition, in ways that could not have been imagined a few decades back.

Within Kerala also, Kathakali is being restructured and redefined by differently positioned groups, so that it becomes expressive of new meanings for which it was never originally intended. The use of Kathakali by the Marxists to convey a radically altered message, is only one example of the different pulls and pressures under which the meaning of tradition is being redefined. Social groups like S.C.s, S.T.s and O.B.Cs are also taking to this form, which in itself is a big break from the past.<sup>8</sup> New forces like globalisation and cultural tourism are exerting a different kind of pressure on the tradition of Kathakali.

All this goes to show how living traditions are never frozen, either in the past or in the present. But when the sociopolitical conditions, in which the form existed are radically altered (as has happened in post-independent India), the cultural form becomes destabilised, where the tradition becomes a site of contestation, with varying pulls and pressures, local, national, international, that try to redefine the form in their own terms. Like most other forms of India, Kathakali is also in this phase of convulsion – in being a tradition and in being a re-scribed tradition, that is trying to come to grips with modernity and globalisation at the same time.

The following statement by Henrietta Moore about the position of culture in the contemporary arena of globalisation aptly sums up Kathakali's present status. "Cultures are becoming both deterritorialised and reterritorialised... cultures are extended across space and time, and formed through new media and coalitions of shifting identities and understandings... the terrain of culture has shifted; new forms of public culture are emerging, as are new ideas of what it means to be 'modern', a citizen, an individual" (1999, 1).

The future of Kathakali is being defined by the various compulsions of the present analysed above. Ultimately it is the genius of all those involved with the art form- the performers, the spectators and the patrons – that will shape the way forward, and decide what changes are wholesome. We can conclude with the words of Sadanam Balakrishnan. "The future of Kathakali, then is neither too bleak nor extraordinarily bright. Changes are inevitable for the evolution of any art form. Kathakali is living proof of this. Modifications will continue to be made to the form but they must always be judiciously selected to sustain the spirit and maintain the format of Kathakali (2005, 272).

## NOTES

1. Some scholars argue that the stories regarding the emergence of these forms, are only legendary and that Ramanattham emerged much earlier, probably in the fourteenth century (See Massey, 2004, 113).
2. There is a legend regarding the origin of the costumes and make-up categories of different characters as well. It is believed that the Raja of North Kottayam, Kottayathu Thampuran, in a dream had a vision of the costume of each category of characters. "The dream showed only the upper part of the actor's body, and therefore the skirts of all Kathakali characters are identical in form" (Pandeya, 1943, 38).
3. Though the text *Hasta Lakshana Deepika*, mentions Bharata, some of the *mudras*, mentioned here, differ from those mentioned by Bharata who, mentions 24 *asamyuta hastas* (single hand gestures) and 13 *samyuta hastas* (using both hands). *Hasta Lakshana Deepika* on the other hand, mentions 24 root *mudras*, which can be used singly or in combination, but always accompanied by the appropriate facial expressions and body movements. Some of these gestures are believed to have been taken from ritualistic, *tantric* practices.
4. Mention is also made of styles like Takazi and Karipuzha but they did not emerge into significant schools.
5. This Namboodiri family, with the family house at Olappamana Mana, is said to have organised its own Kathakali troupe (*Kaliyogam*) which was organised in 1843, and continued till 1905, when the troupe was disbanded.
6. *Sambandham* alliances between Namboodiri men and Nair Women came to an end after the efforts of V.T. Bhattathripad in 1933. Matrilineal system as well as marriages were sought to be brought under legal network by the following laws : Malabar Marriage Act of 1896, applicable to the Madras Presidency; Travancore Nair act of 1912, 1925 and the Cochine Nair Act of 1920.
7. Modern performance theories, that have become, very influential in Folkloristics, insist on how the 'performance text' takes shape only in performance, where the performative context plays a major role. The context includes, "all that is relevant of the social milieu in which the performance exists, the social relationship and identities of the major performers, and of all the participants and audience" (Peter Claus and Frank Korom, 1991, 168). It is only natural that when Kathakali is performed for foreign spectators or in alien contexts, the artistic output and discourse is also altered.
8. Though performers from nontraditional communities are now taking part in Kathakali as artists, they have not yet been able to achieve recognition, except for some exceptions like Kalamandalam Hyder Ali, who has achieved renown as a singer.

## CHAPTER 4

# TERUKKUTTU

### INTRODUCTION

The ritualistic dance-drama form of Tamil Nadu is known by different names such as Kuttu, Kattaikkuttu and Terukkuttu.<sup>1</sup> Its area of activity is the northern districts of Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry. Of the forms that we have analysed so far, Kathakali has attained a classical status, in Yakshagana, its classical or folk status is a hotly debated issue. But Terukkuttu is usually considered a folk form, both by performers and by scholars. We have seen how these categories themselves are artificial constructs, and have the potential to create hierarchies. Terukkuttu has strong ritualistic elements. In the traditional performing contexts, the ritualistic relevance overrides the artistic appeal as is pointed out by Richard Frasca. “Its ritual significance or relevance is of primary importance in Tamil Nadu villages and its value as entertainment subordinate” (1990, 1).

Terukkuttu literally means a street play. The performances are in the open air, with the audience sitting on all three sides. The musicians called *pinpattu* sit at the back of the stage. The accompanying instruments are the percussion instruments (*mradangam* and *dholak*) and a reed like instrument, *mukhaveena*, two pairs of cymbals and harmonium. The stories are mainly from the *Mahabharata*, and are performed in a cycle of nine days. The structure of the performance begins with the preliminaries, with songs in praise of various deities. Then enters the Kattiankaran, who plays the roles of stage manager, clown, herald, etc. and facilitates the entry of major characters. Though his role can be compared to the traditional clown in other South Indian theatre forms, he plays a more central role in this form, controlling the entire flow of performance. As Balvant Gargi says, Terukkuttu “reveals theatrical shrewdness

in the character of Kattiankaran and his function” (1991, 143).

The first entry of major characters is always from behind the hand held curtain (as in Kathakali and Yakshagana). The character slowly reveals himself in his gorgeous costume and make-up. The most dominant feature of the costume are the wooden shoulder ornaments and the huge crown.<sup>2</sup> The actor sings in third person about the entry of the character along with the singers. Only when the curtain is removed, he ‘assumes’ the character and begins speaking in first person. The Kattiankaran questions him about his name, attributes, achievements etc., whereby the actor, in the process of asserting these qualities, ‘becomes’ the character. This process is made part of the performance (Muthukumaraswami, personal interview).

The female roles are also played by men. The lead female role is usually accompanied by female impersonators, who are portrayed as common folk, having a close resemblance to women in the audience. The performance ends with *mangalam*, the formal closure.

The performance lays emphasis on fast vigorous movements, with whirls and jumps suitable for the expression of valorous and furious emotions. The make-up indicates the category to which the character belongs. Green indicates goodness, red indicating a haughty nature. Karna for example, belongs to green category in *Karnamoksham* but in the episode dealing with the cattle war, he is a red category. Red is used to indicate the evil characters. Rose or yellow indicate neutral qualities. Apart from the heroic characters (called *Kattai Vesham*) other characters like female roles, characters in disguise etc., use normal make-up.

A lot of emphasis is laid on *Vachikabhinaya* in the form of dialogues both written down and improvised. Gestures and dance movements are not stylised or codified as in Kathakali. Acting involves rolling of eyes, pouting of the tongue, howling, etc.

Terukkuttu has a strong rural base and its players and audience mostly belong to what is termed as the lower strata of rural (now urban as well) society. As a result, this form has often been neglected and looked down upon as ‘folk’ in the pejorative sense of the term, by the urban elite as is pointed out by Hanne de Bruin.

Many urban, elite members of Indian society wrongly conclude from the absence of codification that *Kuttu* performances are largely improvised. They tend to regard *Kuttu* as an unsophisticated and degenerated theatre form that can only please

‘the uneducated and illiterate’. This prejudice seems to be caused by the low caste of the performers rather than by the lack of artistic value of professional *Kuttu* performances (1999, 41).

Such an attitude may appear strange in the Tamil society, which is proud of its classical cultural forms like Bharatnatyam or Karnataka music. But on closer look, it points out the profound truth that the concept of what constitutes ‘high culture’ is also part of the hegemony of the elite and the upper castes. That Terukkuttu belongs mostly to the non-Brahminical, rural society, has meant a lower status for this form, irrespective of its artistic merit or potential.

In music, some of the *ragas* of Karnataka music are used but in a different style. The actors also intone with the singers. The most unique feature of Terukkuttu’s singing is the high pitch (called seven and a half *kattai*) of the singers.

#### PERFORMATIVE CONTEXT – *BHARATAM*

Traditionally Terukkuttu performances have been associated with the temples of village deities,<sup>3</sup> specially Draupadi Amman temples in the northern districts of Tamil Nadu (Cheyar, Vilupuram, Kanchipuram, Kadalur, parts of Dharmapuri dists.) and Pondicherry. Alf Hiltebeitel who has worked extensively on Draupadi cult, mentions the existence of more than two hundred Draupadi temples in North and South Arcot districts alone. He relates the development of Draupadi worship to the kingdom of Gingee and says that it may have started around 14<sup>th</sup> century A.D. He further adds, “The song sung at the beginning and ending of each performance relates Draupadi not merely to her temple but also to the kingdom of Gingee and the village Melacceri (Old Gingee)” (1991, 3-4).<sup>4</sup>

The entire Bharatam performance is a month long affair which includes rituals, story telling in the afternoon and concluding with the dramatic performances on the last few days. The Tamil versions of *Mahabharata*, *Vellikoothuraya Bharatam* (13<sup>th</sup> C.) and *Nallapillai Bharatam* (18<sup>th</sup> C.) are used for the elaboration of the Mahabharata story. In these versions, we can already see a certain level of localisation of the pan Indian epic. Draupadi, the wife of the Pandava brothers, is deified and equated with the village deity in these temples. She is supposed to safeguard the village, assure fertility and well



being of the village community, their children and their animal wealth. The performance of the Bharatam ritual is closely linked to such a belief, points out M.D. Muthukumaraswami:

The belief system structures, relates, shapes and interprets the sacred text and performance and so organizes the levels of participation of the villagers... the villagers had organised a full *Mahabharata* festival... because they were concerned about the failure of monsoons year after year. The fact that the festival was being organised after a lapse of several years enlivened their hopes of rejuvenation, agricultural prosperity and growth. The festival accentuated, fine-tuned and aligned the subliminal consciousness of the villagers towards *Mahabharata* through Therukoothu and other theatrical devices employed in the rituals and story telling” (2006, 41).<sup>5</sup>

The performance space is usually in front of the temple and the expenses are borne by the villagers through contributions. The entire cycle of rituals and performance costs a good deal of money and so may be performed once in several years depending on the financial resources. The cycle of plays depict several incidents from *Mahabharata*, which include episodes like the disrobing of Druapadi after the dice game, the fight for the cattle at the end of *agyatavasa* (living incognito) by the Pandavas, Arjuna’s Penance, etc. It will end with the killing of Duryodhan by Bhima and the coronation of Dharmaraya. Hanne de Briun mentions a cycle of eleven plays popular in Cheyyar Taluk (1999, 113–114).

There are several fertility rituals connected with the performance of some of the episodes where the entire village takes part and the whole village becomes the performance space. For example, in *Arjuna’s Penance*, the actor playing the role of Arjuna, climbs a tall pole that is erected for the purpose. From there, he throws down flowers and lemons. People who are childless or want blessings, gather around the pole and collect the flowers or lemon in the belief that their wishes will be fulfilled. During the episode of the cattle fight, all the cattle of the village are brought out on the streets of the village. The actors playing the roles of Arjuna, Bhima, Karna and Duryodhana, in full costume, run round the cattle, chasing them here and there. The villagers also take part in it and this ritualistic performance is believed to ensure the well being of the cattle. During the enactment of *Bakasura Vadha*, Bhima goes round the village in a bullock cart and is given rice, vegetables etc. by the villagers. This ritual is believed to protect the children and enhance the

fertility of the soil. In the episode where Draupadi puts on the guise of a Kuravanji (nomadic fortune teller), children are given in the hands of the actor playing Kuravanji, for their well being. Some grains are also received by the villagers to ensure abundant crops. Richard Frasca uses the term 'communitas' to indicate how the entire village, irrespective of caste, class inequalities becomes one during these ritualistic performances. The entire space of the village and all the inhabitants thus relate themselves to the Mahabharata. "The most striking aspect of this homogeneous communal consciousness is that through these large scale enactments, the village as a whole identifies itself directly with the mythology" (Frasca, 1990, 169).

During the performance of the entire cycle, a huge idol of Duryodhana, made of mud and sand, lying prone, is prepared and he becomes a mute witness to the entire proceedings. On the last day of the battle, when Bhima kills Duryodhana, the spectators also beat the idol with broomsticks. The ritualistic performance comes to an end with the coronation of Dharmaraya.

These details point to the unique features of Terukkuttu as a theatrical tradition. The entire village becomes the performance space. The villagers are not merely the spectators but also become the participants in the performance. The strong framework of faith and ritual binds both the actors and spectators and ensures the continuity of the tradition. We can understand the ingenuity and inventiveness of Terukkuttu's theatrical idiom which has the potential to involve the entire village. Modern theatre is now engaged in the search of precisely these qualities – where spectators and participants become one and where performance becomes a ritual. The theatrical versatility and potential of traditions like Terukkuttu becomes clear in the strong ritualistic framework and the participatory mode of theatre. The following comment by Na. Muthuswami, a leading theatre personality, makes this point explicit. "In its native setting, Koothu takes the whole village as its performing arena. All the villagers become loyal citizens of Pandavas. It is audience participation at its fullest" (1985, 81).

### *Possession*

Another unique feature of ritualistic Terrukkuttu performances, relates to possession (*avesham*). During the course of performance, specially of certain episodes like the disrobing of Draupadi, the actors playing these roles may

get possessed by the spirit of the deity. It is not uncommon for some in the audience also to get possessed. Calling this aspect the 'sacral status', of the form, Hanne de Bruin explains the philosophy embedded in it thus. "The unexpressed objective of a Kattaikkuttu performance, which may be staged for any deity is to invite the dangerous sacred. Its potential destructive force can then be neutralised, whereas its potential benevolent powers can then be tapped for one's own and for the community's benefit. In other words, a Kattaikkuttu performance is a medium to establish contact with what I call 'special power'" (1999, 124).

The possession may take place in demonic characters like Dushyasana, Duryodhana, Kicaka etc. or the characters representing the forces of good like Draupadi, Bhima or Narasimha. At such moments, the actors become uncontrollable and have to be supported. Moments of possession usually take place in climactic moments of confrontation and battle. The audience also eagerly await for these moments and begin to chant prayers when the possession takes place. At such moments, prayers are offered to the deity. Even, the actor playing the role joins the prayer, saying that he is only so and so and is playing this role only for the sake of performance and begs forgiveness from the deity (Mathukumaraswami, personal interview). The actor, 'comes out' of the character and joins the spectators in praying to the deity. This ritualistic prayer also becomes part of the stage action.

Some actors are said to be more specialised in getting possessed or it may even be faked says Hanne. "Possession in professional performers is anticipated by Kattaikkuttu audiences and forms an almost technical part of their job. It could therefore be termed 'professional possession' ...Acting out possession is not really considered cheating but rather a fulfilment of the artist's convention that the performances should be *Kiramattin Ishtam* 'according to the wish of the village' (1999, 130). From the actor's perspective, she analyses possession in terms of the 'heat' generated, which gets expressed through the body state.

This may also give us an insight into Terukkuttu's approach to acting and character representation. Among the many approaches to the question of acting, an important one relates to the concept of possession – is the actor possessed by the character, does he become a medium for the visualisation of the character? The examples of possession described earlier are ostensible instances. But the concept of possession points to Terukkuttu's approach to

acting. Through a long process of make-up (done by the actor himself), he is preparing mentally to enter into the character<sup>6</sup>. But as noted earlier, the actor ‘assumes’ the character, on the stage, in full view of the spectators. The high pitched music and the fast pace of movements aid the actor in getting into the character – in getting ‘possessed’.

### *Localisation of Mahabharata*

Terukkuttu is an enactment of the pan Indian classical epic of Mahabharata, but through a process of interjections by the writers of the playscripts (*vadyars*) as well as the artists, the narrative has been localised. Many new characters not found in the Sanskrit epic are introduced, local customs and belief systems have been made part of the performance. We have already seen how Draupadi has become Draupadi Amman, the local deity protecting the entire village. Commenting on such a process of localisation of the pan Indian epic, Richard Frasca says, “The Mahabharata cult [in Tamil Nadu] represented a complex fusion of elements from epic mythology – Tamil village goddess worship and the devotional worship of the god Krishna, her protector. It effectively transforms Draupadi of the epic into Draupadi, the village amman, a powerful goddess who presides over and protects a village” (1990, 597). We can take other examples of this process of localisation. Karna’s wife Ponnuravi is a major character in *Karna Moksham* but never finds a mention in the Sanskrit epic. Similarly Draupadi as Kuravanji is a purely local creation, relating Draupadi to the community of nomadic fortune tellers. Similar is the case of Aravan, Arjuna’s son and Pottharaja, the guardian of the Pandavas. Aravan is the presiding deity of transexuals, who gather in large numbers and worship him once a year at the Aravan temple at Koothandavar in Vilupuram dist. Similarly Pottharaja seems to be a local cult figure who has been assimilated into the epic canvas of Mahabharata.<sup>7</sup>

Details like these indicate how the Sanskrit epic is localised and made relevant to the Tamil ethos and culture. By adding certain elements, leaving out certain others, emphasising elements that are considered important, the pan Indian is not merely made local, it is also made to serve local aesthetic, cultural needs. It may also serve certain social, political purposes, though at a symbolic level. We have also seen in the case of Kathakali, how cultural forms also become expressive of social, political urges. The same is true of

Terukkuttu as well. Look at the following remark by Hanne. “Vanniyars and Cenkuntar Mutaliars regularly sponsored performances. Both communities aspire a Kshatriya status. The commissioning of a Kattaikuttu play or a complete *Paratam* festival is one of the means of asserting their heroic self image” (1999, 112). Sponsoring a Mahabharata performance is not merely a means of affirming their position in society but also of relating to the pan Indian social structure (and thereby gaining social prestige).

### OTHER PERFORMATIVE CONTEXTS

Though the Mahabharata cycle forms the most prestigious occasion of Terukkuttu performances, there are several other contexts when they are performed. Rituals of other village deities like Mariamman, Ankalamman are also occasions for Terukkuttu performances. A single performance or a short cycle of performances may be performed on these occasions. Festivities in the temples of pan Indian deities like Shiva or Vishnu often become occasions for Terukkuttu performances. They may also be sponsored by individuals or families. For example, *Karna Moksham* is performed at the end of the 16 day funeral rites, after the death of a person. It is supposed to assure the deliverance of the departed soul from the cycle of rebirth. In the play, Krishna assures deliverance to Karna as part of a ritual, that has ‘attributes used at a funeral ceremony’ (Hanne, 1999, 281). The relatives of the deceased person also take part in the ritual conducted as part of performance. Krishna gives Karna a *darshan* (vision) seated on his bird vehicle (Garuda) and accompanied by his wives. This performance is essentially ritualistic and the blessings of the almighty are supposed to be transferred to the performers and through them to the sponsors and spectators. The strong Vaishnava influence is visible in this practice and the performance of this episode is considered the equivalent of the reading of *Garuda Purana*, a ritual practised usually by Brahmins as part of funeral rites.<sup>8</sup>

Other than these ritualistic occasions, new occasions not related to ritualistic contexts are becoming more frequent now. Similarly plays not based on Mahabharata are being written and performed. These developments will be dealt with in the next part of this chapter.

Traditionally particular Terukkuttu troupes were associated with particular temples. Taking part in the ritualistic performance was considered their duty

as well as right. They would be paid in the form of cash or kind which was called *mamul*. The performers had no right to negotiate about the remuneration and had to accept whatever was offered. This kind of obligation was related to the social structuration of the village, the perceived higher status of the patrons and the lower status of the performers.

## THE PROCESS OF TRANSFORMATION

Compared to other dance-drama forms of South India, under discussion here, Terukkuttu was the last to gain exposure to the urban elite as well as to the national cultural agencies, though it had flourished for centuries in the traditional areas of its activity. E. Krishna Iyer a well-known theatre scholar is said to have organised village theatre festivals, in 1956 and 1957 where Terukkuttu troupes were invited to perform in a new 'cultural' context (Hanne, 2000, 114). Nateshan Tambiran, the renowned Terukkuttu artist was awarded the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi award and his troupe performed in Delhi.

N. Muthuswami, a leading theatre person, associated with the troupe Koothu Pattarai of Chennai, has been working for the revival and reinterpretation of Terukkuttu for more than a quarter of a century. He explains how he and his friends of *Little Magazine* movement, were exposed to Terukkuttu only in 1975. (personal interview). In the same year, in the classical dance and music concerts and discussions (that are held annually in Chennai), the 'classical' forms of Bharatnatyam and Kathakali were being elaborated upon by scholars. During the debate, when Muthuswami mentioned Terukkuttu and pointed out that this was the real theatre of Tamil Nadu, he still remembers how he was jeered at by most of the participants. He explains how this made him more resolute to study Terukkuttu, write about it and conduct further experiments in his troupe Koothu Pattarai which was started in 1977 (Also see V. Padma, 2008, 75–76).

This incident highlights the attitude of the urban cultural elite towards Terukkuttu as late as the last quarter of twentieth century. It has been a long tortuous journey indeed for this form, to gain recognition by the urban elite. Old prejudices are changing and this form is now being recognised as representative of Tamil culture. This does not mean that the old prejudices have vanished. But in negotiating with the challenges of modernity, the form

is rescribing itself, even as it is fighting against these prejudices. These changes in any cultural form, as we have already observed, are linked to the changes in the sociopolitical sphere. Commenting on such a change and its impact on Terukkuttu, Hanne de Briun says, “The transformation of the rural economy into a cash economy and the relaxation of the caste system led to the erosion of local systems of the division of occupational and ritual labour and its accompanying patronage which until then had provided an economic basis for rural traditional theatre forms such as Kattaikuttu. The traditional token remuneration was no longer sufficient to engage a whole company of performers. It forced exponents of these ‘pre-modern’ theatre genres to start negotiating remuneration in cash for their performances and to look for new performance venues” (2003, 3). As a result, the traditional structures and interrelations of different groups within the village community also began breaking down.

#### *Professionalism among Troupes*

These changes had their impact on Terukkuttu troupes as well. The traditional system of a troupe having a right and obligation to perform in a certain temple, irrespective of the returns, began breaking down. Instead of the old *mamul* system, troupes began to expect to be paid in cash and began to negotiate the amount to be paid. As a result, the relationship between the patrons and artists began changing from one of subservience to one of reciprocity but among unequals as is pointed out by Hanne. “However this relationship has remained one of reciprocity between two parties of unequal status; during the last two decades or so, the subordinate position of the performers has become less poignant but it has not completely disappeared” (1999, 146).<sup>9</sup>

So now the troupes are free to perform in any precinct where they receive an invitation. The patrons also feel free to invite any troupe that will fulfil their aesthetic and ritualistic desires. As a result, the troupes have also become more professional, trying to develop their own distinctive styles and artistic finesse, as this can create greater opportunities for the troupe.

Changes have taken place within the organisation of the troupes as well. Artists feel free to move from troupe to troupe at the beginning of the Terukkuttu season. Now people not traditionally associated with this art, are

also entering this field as organisers. Artists are now in the habit of receiving 'advance' during the off season from the organisers of troupes as well as financiers. This is one of the major problems forcing the artists into indebtedness and affecting their artistic quality as well, according to Hanne Bruin (2003, 8–9).

### *New Troupes—Changing Caste Equations*

Traditionally the ritualistic performances of Terukkuttu are associated with the non-Brahminical communities. Frasca points out how this rite is “dominated by village groups that are distinctly low: Vannian agriculturists, Tampiran *Pujaris*, Acari carpenters, Utaiyar carpenters, Vannan washermen and other communities making up the lower portions of the Tamil social hierarchy” (1990, 177). But in the ritualistic performances, they were given prominence as they had the special prowess to negotiate with the sacred powers of the deity. They also became the mediators through whom, the destructive powers could be controlled and the blessings of the deity could flow to the entire village. Though the position of these castes in the society as a whole was low, the ritualistic performance gave them an assured place and prominence in society. The performance also provided an opportunity for “clear reversal of status and social hierarchy” (Frasca, 1990, 178). Many of the spectators and patrons belonged to the Vanniar caste (now categorised under Other Backward Castes) who aspire to the Kshatriya – Warrior status.

With the radical changes taking place in post-independent India, the caste system is also undergoing a sea change, where each caste is trying to assert its identity and political elout specially if it has the numbers. In villages where Vannniars are in large numbers, they are also associated with the Draupadi Amman temples where the ritualistically charged Bharatam performances are held. The attempt at upward social mobility of this group, as well as the assertion of their identity has resulted in the rejuvenation of many religious deities which have also become important centres of Terukkuttu performances. The political aspirations of this community has resulted in the establishment of a new political party, Pattali Makkal Kachi (PMK) which has seen a fair amount of political success as well.

Many among the Vanniars are also now becoming Terukkuttu performers and organisers of troupes. The sponsors in Vanniar dominated villages seem



to prefer the artists of their own caste group (Hanna, 2003, 10). This has resulted in competition among the troupes. These developments also indicate how new blood is being infused into this art form with the entry of artists from nontraditional caste groups. It has also resulted in greater opportunities for performance. All this indicates how, Terukkuttu is re-scribing itself, and how it is becoming expressive of contemporary social urges and tensions. It points to the vibrancy and flexibility of the form that it is not merely coping with these challenges but has also become an instrument for expressing the social convulsions. As Hanne de Bruin says, “It is a flourishing tradition, and has through its inherent flexibility, been able to adjust to and profit from changes within the Tamil society” (1999, 153).

### *New Contexts of Performance*

With the recognition that Terukkuttu has now received as the representative Tamil folk theatre, new avenues and opportunities are also opening up. It is also moving from the traditional ritualistic space to the secular space of culture and government patronage. Culture departments of government, both state and centre are giving grants, awards for artists and are creating new opportunities for the performance. This new opportunity has created related problems as well. All the grant giving bodies being situated in cities, troupes, mostly situated in villages find it hard, to get into this circle, unless they have the right network of links and relations. So, the general impression is that certain groups are favoured over others.

Another problem relates to audience expectations. The artists have traditionally been attuned to the ritualistic framework and the concomitant expectation of the spectators. But in a nonritualistic context, they are forced to alter their approach and the performance text as a whole. Many a time, the all night performance will have to be reduced to two to three hours. This will mean a drastic change in the performance text. The artists exhibit the resilience to cope with these challenges.

These new systems of patronage can create other more subtle threats as well. Terukkuttu as we have observed, has always survived in the villages catering to the needs of a rural audience. When the same form begins to address a larger, urban, heterogeneous audience, there will also be an attempt to ‘purify’ the form, from its ‘crude, folk’ antecedents, to a ‘pure art form’

that is acceptable to the cultural elites. In such an attempt, there is not merely the bias of the urban, educated elite, there is also the grave threat of appropriation, where the very people who have nurtured this form for centuries may be kept away from it.<sup>10</sup> Such a possibility has political overtones, feels Hanne:

It provides the arts establishment with an opportunity to ‘rescue’ the tradition from the hands of its illiterate exponents in order to restore it to its ‘previous glorious state’. This rhetoric is a powerful instrument by which to legitimize, for example practices of biased patronage as well as other forms of appropriation of the theatre by members of the urban elite. The idea of salvage feeds also into the desire of creating cultural icons that unproblematically (re)present India’s hoary spiritual and cultural heritage by confirming its status and cultural identity among other nation-states in an increasingly globalizing world (2003, 6).

### *New Organisations*

Several new organisations are now engaged in the revival and resurrection of Terukkuttu. Though the ideological underpinnings of these organisations are different, they are devoted to re-scribing the traditional form, in order to face the challenges of modernity. They are all committed to maintaining what they perceive as tradition, even while making it relevant to the fast changing social, cultural, scene of Tamil Nadu and India in this era of globalisation.

We have already observed how Koothu Pattarai, Chennai, has been engaging itself with Terukkuttu since 1977. They have been working with the famed Nateshan and Kannappa Tambiran’s troupe.<sup>11</sup> They have been associated with projecting Terukkuttu at the national level and with many experiments in adapting elements of Terukkuttu to modern stage. N. Muthuswami reminisced how Banshi Kaul, the renowned theatre person, produced a play, *Panchali Shapatham* making use of many aspects of Terukkuttu around 1978 (with inputs from Kashi, Kannappa Tambiran’s son). This according to him, was the first attempt to use Terukkuttu on the modern stage. With Kannappa Tambiran’s help, they started recovering many aspects of tradition that were either forgotten or had become deformed. One of the charges levelled against these efforts was that they were trying to modernise

the traditional form. Muthuswami's counter to this change is that they were only trying to get back elements that were lost or deformed – in other words, they were trying to recover tradition and not modernise it. This attitude of revivalism – of trying to recover what is presumed to be lost or deformed is one of the most important ways in which most Indian traditional arts have tried to counter the forces of modernism. Such efforts almost always emerge from agencies outside the traditional frame of the arts concerned. But in such an effort, what is not often realised is that revivalism is itself a modernist trend that presupposes that traditions are in the danger of being lost or deformed and so need to be 'protected'. What is not often realised is that what we perceive as tradition is and has always been in a state of flux and is never still or frozen.

Koothu Pattarai has also been experimenting with new themes and plays. Two plays based on the *Ramayana* were tried by them and these have now come to be accepted by other troupes as well. A daring experimentation was the adaptation of story by Dante Gabriel Marques in Terukkuttu idiom, for the theatre festival at Columbia. They have also popularised performances of shorter duration. Muthuswami is confident of the future of Terukkuttu, specially now with national and international exposure. About the changing perception about this form, he tersely adds, "When I started working on Terukkuttu in 1970s, the Marxists called us feudal and the cultural pundits named us revivalists. Now the same people are calling it people's art and folk theatre" (Personal interview). Now they are engaged in working on social awareness programmes and are interacting with ten Terukkuttu troupes for this purpose in several villages<sup>11</sup>.

Another major effort at organising the artists connected with this form, at the grass root level was the establishment of Kattaikoothu Kalai Valarchi Munnetra Sangam in 1990. Its aim was to provide a platform where the artists could discuss issues related to their form and also to act as a bridge between these village based artists and government agencies. The most important purpose was to give voice to the concerns of the artists themselves and to retain Terukkuttu's identity as representative of local culture as is explained by Hanna de Bruin. "It [the Sangam] wants to keep Kattaikkuttu in the hands of its contemporary exponents who should have the liberty to utilise Kattaikkuttu as an instrument to strengthen local culture and varied local practices, thus providing a counterweight to a dominant (global) perception of cultural expressions, religion and society" (2003,12).

The Sangam is running a training school since 2001 where training is imparted in this art form. It is also giving training to school children (boys and girls) along with formal education. Esmme Merten, analysing the effect of this parallel art training on children says that it has contributed greatly to the development of communicative and social skills of the students and has also led to their cultural development (2005, 63–65). The Sangam is also trying to break the advance system, by following the policy of consensus among artists and is creating opportunities for interaction with other art forms.

Other organisations like National Folklore Support Centre, Chennai are also working for creating an awareness about this form through publications and other academic activities.

A new opportunity that has arisen is the coverage that Terukkuttu is now getting in television channels. This was first started by Makkal T.V., the mouth-piece of P.M.K. party. Other Tamil channels are also providing slots for Terukkuttu. It is also being used by political parties to reach out to the urban and rural masses. Edwina Ranganathan writing in 1980s states, “Since these performances are so important to the poor communities, political parties have hired Terukkuttu actors to perform sociological themes extolling the merits of their party and political ideas” (1983, 11). The form now has to redefine itself for the new demands of television as well.

As a result of the efforts of these organisations and also due to the changed/ changing perception of what constitutes ‘culture’ (as a result of sociopolitical changes), the position of Terukkuttu in this mapping of Tamil culture is also undergoing a massive change. Terukkuttu has always had an important ritualistic, cultural place in the traditional area of its activity. But in the educated, urban cultural milieu, it was often regarded as crude, unpolished, ‘folk’. But these preconceived prejudices are now changing (though slowly) and it is now gaining recognition as the true representative of Tamil theatre. As a marker of this changed vision of Terukkuttu, it was performed for the first time only recently in the festival at Kalakshetra, Chennai, which is usually considered as the fortress of the elite spectators and ‘classical’ arts. Thus even while being rooted firmly in the rural moorings, Terukkuttu is negotiating with the new contexts of performance, unfamiliar audience expectations, from the urban milieu to the national and international spaces. In this process, its inherent flexibility and resilience are defining the parameters within which it is being rescribed.

## RENAMING THE FORM – KATTAIKKUTTU

We have already seen how Terukkuttu was not accorded prestige by the urban middle classes. An ambitious attempt at claiming the prestige was to rename the form by Kattaikkuttu Sangam. Drawing inspiration from the most unique feature of the costume – the wooden shoulder ornaments, crown and breast plate, known as *Kattai Chamankal*, the form was renamed Kattaikkuttu. Terukkuttu as we have seen literally means street play. It refers both to the theatre form that is performed in the open air and to the participation in ritualistic procession, by the actors in full costume, when the deity is taken out in procession, in the streets. In order to differentiate these two forms of performance, the term Kattaikkuttu was coined to specifically indicate the all night theatrical form. The assumption behind such an attempt was that the street performance was largely responsible for the low status accorded to this form.

Another reason for opting for a new name was that the word Terukkuttu had attained a derogatory connotation. The reason for it is explained by Hanne de Bruin. "... the practice of Terukkuttu appears to have been the prerogative of a few Vannar (washerman) lineages of performers... [who] felt that the name 'Terukkuttu' drew attention to their caste background and by implication, to their former subordinated position" (2000, 103).

The renaming of this form has led to a heated debate about the need or appropriateness of this change of nomenclature. Particularly the involvement of a foreign scholar in the renaming process, seems to have created an antagonism. But Hanne de Bruin, the scholar in question strongly argues that it was the artists themselves who felt the need to change the name to overcome the negative connotations that had come to be associated with Terukkuttu (2000, 102–104). She also relates this debate to the more fundamental questions about "who can claim to be the theatre's 'legitimate' representatives, and who will ultimately decide its form and content" (2000, 111).

This kind of change seems to have been inspired by the change in the nomenclature of the dance form known by names such as *dasi attam* or *sadir* which has now gained acclaim as Bharatanatyam. This was a name that was coined only in 1930s by revivalists like Rukmini Devi Arundel, V. Raghavan and E. Krishna Iyer. This change was engendered by the upper echelons

particularly the Brahmins who were engaged in the ostensible task of 'retrieving' the form, with the result that the traditional exponents have almost been cut off from the dance form now.<sup>8</sup>

But, the sociopolitical situation has been changing markedly since the early part of twentieth century. Though the caste inequalities have not vanished, the caste groups that were placed in the lower rungs have become more aware of their rights and are now asserting their rightful place in society as well as their identity. Such a process can also be related to the democratic setup in independent India. This assertion can be seen in the ritualistic and cultural spheres as well.

The word Terukkuttu can be compared to the word *bayalata* in Kannada. This word literally means play or performance in the open field. This is a generic term applied to all traditional dance-drama forms that are performed in the open air. It is not merely suggestive of the performative space but hints at a world-view that is all inclusive—irrespective of the differences of caste and creed, everyone is welcome to witness these performances. Such a world view stands in opposition to that of the classical forms that were performed indoors, either within the precincts of a temple or in the courts of kings and land lords. These are exclusivist forms which were open only to the select few. The performative space (indicated by the nomenclature) thus becomes a sign representing these opposite world views.<sup>12</sup>

This debate regarding the name, indicates how the traditional forms have become contested territories where differently placed sections of the society are playing out the social and political tensions of the regional, national and international arena. The new name has also led to some confusion as the new nomenclature has not received universal acceptance and as Muthukumaraswami says, Hanne seems to be the lone scholar who uses that name (personal interview).

## NEW PLAYS, NEW THEMES

Though the traditional repertoire of Terukkuttu consists of the plays dealing with the *Mahabharata*, it has shown great flexibility in dealing with new themes. Localised versions of the pan-Indian epic have always been projected in this form. The process of enacting new themes has been accentuated now, with the greater popularity of the form and the growing

demand of the audience. Some of these new plays were based on the *Ramayana*. Muthuswami N. mentions two plays based on the *Ramayana*, which they performed for the first time and which have now come to be accepted even by traditional troupes.

The flexibility of the form has always allowed scope for contemporaneity. The improvisations have been used to make social and political comments specially by the clown and Kattiankaran. Now the reinterpretations of the epics have also been attempted in the new plays being written. For example, the new play *Khandavavana Dahanam* (The burning of the forest Khandava), even as it deals with the episode from the epic, emphasises on protecting the ecology.

The inspiration for the new plays has come from various sources. *Manimalan's Battle*, where Bhima goes in search of the heavenly mandara flower, seems to have drawn inspiration from the celebrated Kathakali play, *Kalyanasougandhikam*. Another play deals with the deity Ayyappa of Sabarimala who has a great following in the whole of South India.

Several totally new and innovative plays have also been written and staged. Muthuswami's daring experimentation of staging the Columbian writer Marquis' story has already been mentioned. Hanne de Bruin gives a list of such plays performed by Kattaikkuttu Sangam. Many of them are children's plays. Some deal with issues like ecology and social harmony (1999, 123). All these new attempts point to the innate flexibility of the form and show how the form is re-scribing itself coping with the challenges of modernity, from within the traditional frame work. But totally new experiments which seem to break away from the framework of the form (like the adaptation of Marquis's story) have not received wider acceptance.

## REVIVAL OF RITUALISM

In the case of Yakshagana, we saw how in the last decade, there has been marked rise in the number of troupes devoted to ritualistic performances. This development has taken place after decades of commercialisation when these 'tent troupes' (where admission is through tickets) ruled the roost. But in the present decade, there has been a clear upward swing in ritualistic performances, performed in the open air.

A similar development seems to be taking place in Terukkuttu as well.

Terukkuttu never became commercialised in the way in which Yakshagana did. But in the present decade, there appears to be a clear increase in ritualistic performances. Muthukumaraswami explained to me how in the past, the elaborate sixteen day performances were reduced to three or five days and even these could not be held for several years. But according to him, the situation has changed in the present decade, with a marked increase in the number of festivals taking place now. As a result, the troupes are in greater demand, even though not much money is made by the troupes (personal interview).

This development seems to be directly related to the assertion of caste identities of non-Brahminical groups, as these village deities and related rituals are associated with them. The performances also become one visual assertion of such social political aspirations. In such contexts, we can observe how the traditional performing art becomes expressive of new social tensions and urges, thus communicating new meanings, that are different from the traditional ones. At such moments, when the form begins to be utilised for expressing contemporary contestations, it undergoes a process of re-scribing and begins to express these new meanings. We have already observed in the previous section how the Vanniar community is closely engaged in this process of re-scribing, not merely by sponsoring Terukkuttu ritualistic performances but also by starting their own troupes. Such a process can be directly related to the current social, political, aspirations of the community as a whole.

At the same time, we can observe an opposite process that is also taking place in the religious sphere. Hanne de Bruin mentions how some of these village deities, which follow non-Brahminical rituals, are also undergoing the process of Brahminisation. She mentions how many of these village goddesses are getting more Brahminised and receiving advice from the Shankaracharya of Kanchipuram about the 'proper' mode of worship and ritual (2003,11). Both these conflicting pressures – of Brahminisation and of assertion of non-Brahminical identities – are operating in the society at the present moment. Terukkuttu is being redefined under these conditions and is also becoming an expressive vehicle of some of these compulsions.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout its long existence, Terukkuttu has been closely associated with



the rural life of northern Tamil Nadu. It has survived as a ritualistic theatre form related to the worship of the largely non-Brahminical village deities. It underwent a period of crisis in the first half of 20th century, with Tamil films and drama troupes posing a great threat. But the form has shown great resilience and flexibility in coping with the changing circumstances and the challenges posed by them.

The last few decades have been a period of resurgence. Terukkuttu has succeeded in reestablishing itself as ritualistic theatre, adjusting itself to the changes in the rural society. Due to the efforts of many organisations and individuals, it has also succeeded in redefining itself to the vastly divergent demands of the modern nation-state, where it has to negotiate with new performative spaces, new organisations (governmental, non-governmental). The present phase appears to be one of resurgence. “During the last two decades, it has been able to make a remarkable comeback and as confirmed by the rising performance fees, the increasing number of performances and the increasing number of professional Kattaikkuttu troupes” (Hanne, 1999, 320).

In this process, the form is changing subtly and some times overtly as response to these challenges of modernity. Thus it stands as a fine example of a tradition that is in the process of re-scribing itself in the face of all the tensions and challenges analysed above. That it has been able to do so points to its bright future.

## NOTES

1. The name of this form has also become a matter of debate. Some scholars like Hanne de Bruin prefer to use the term, Kattaikkuttu. This issue has been dealt with in the latter part of this chapter. I have preferred to use the name by which this form has generally been known.
2. The fantastic shoulder ornaments are made of wood and are called *Bhujakeerti*. They bear a resemblance to the shoulder ornaments used in *Moodalapaya* (eastern) Yakshagana of Karnataka, which shares many other similar features with Terrukkuttu.
3. Such village deities, called by different names are found all over South India. Such local deities are part of the folk ritualistic practices. One recent development is that these local deities, many a time outside the pan Indian pantheon, are gaining in prestige and popular appeal in the last few decades.

4. Hanne de Bruin mentions that though this song is sung in the northern style of Terukkuttu, the reference to Draupadi's temple at Gingee/Melaceri is left out (1999, 39).
5. I am thankful to Sri Muthukumaraswami M.D. for sharing many of these ideas with me during a personal interview.
6. In Yakshagana also, the custom is that each actor does his own make-up. The approach to character representation is guided by the character types as indicated by make-up and costume codification in Yakshagana, Kathakali and Terukkuttu.
7. It is interesting to note that Potharaja is an important cult figure related to the rituals of Maariamman in Karnataka. Terukkuttu is linked to the ritualistic performances in Mariamman temples as well in Tamil Nadu. Muthukumaraswamy points out that Potharaja was a historical figure who ruled over Gingee kingdom and says, "His accommodation as a mythical character along with other characters in Mahabharata reveals the way history and mythology mix" (2006, 63).
8. Another occasion for sponsoring a Terrukkuttu performance was after completing a pilgrimage to Tirupati, though this practice has become infrequent now.
9. I am indebted to Hanne de Bruin's writings for many of the ideas expressed here.
10. There is a historical antecedent for such a fear within Tamil Nadu itself. *Sadir* or *dasiattam* was a dance form practiced by the *devadasis*. In the early part of the twentieth century, attempts were made to 'purify' the form, by the cultural elites, specially the Brahmins. The result was the emergence of Bharatanatyam, which has now almost become synonymous with Indian culture. But in the process, the dance form has almost entirely been appropriated by the upper echelons of society and the community that had nurtured this form, has almost entirely been excluded from the prestige and cultural space that is accorded to this form now in the name of Bharatanatyam. Look at the following remark by the son of a *devadasi* quoted by Anne Marie Gaston. "Why is it that when Brahmins began to perform the dance, the dancers were given respect and my mother wasn't. The Brahmins have taken over the dance" (1996, 37).
11. The details given here are based on the personal interview I had with N. Muthuswami.
12. The general implications of these oppositional performative spaces are analysed in ch.1.

## CHAPTER 5

# KUCHIPUDI

Kuchipudi is the name now given to the traditional dance-drama as well as the solo dance form of Andhra Pradesh. This form emerged in a small village of the same name, Kuchipudi, situated in Divi taluk along the bank of Krishna river, which was basically a settlement of Brahmins (*agraharam*). This dance form has now attained the status of a classical solo form along with other dance forms of India like Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Odissi, etc.,. This evolution of the solo dance, performed mostly by women, out of a dance-drama that was performed only by men belonging to the Brahmin caste is in itself a fascinating feature of the process of radical transformation that this genre has undergone. From a ritualistic form that was performed in a village, it has also expanded its horizon, where it is now being performed in national and international venues as a representative form of Andhra and Indian culture. After a brief look at the history of Kuchipudi and its relation to other performative genres of Andhra Pradesh, this chapter will focus attention on how Kuchipudi went through this process of re-scribing in the last few decades, and how different compulsions—cultural, social and economic—hastened this near total transformation of the form.

## ORIGIN AND GROWTH

This geographical region that is now enclosed by Andhra Pradesh, has been ruled by a whole galaxy of kingdoms and empires like Satavahanas, Chalukyas, Kakatiyas, Vijayanagara empire, etc. Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and offshoots of Hinduism like Vaisnavism and Veerashaivism flourished here at different periods. The kings were also great builders of temples and patrons of arts like dance and music. The *devadasi* system prevailed here also and there are mentions that some temples supported as many as 300 *devadasis*

(Acharya and Sarabhai, 1992, 13).<sup>1</sup> Due to such patronage, a variety of performance genres, performed by *devadasis* as well as by other groups, flourished in this region. Under the influence of the Bhakti movement, during the medieval period, many of these forms were utilised for the spread of the religious message by the saints, which gave these forms, a new orientation and a new lease of life. The patronage for Telugu performance traditions, was continued by the Nayaka and Maratha rulers of Tanjavur in Tamil Nadu. Under such conditions a host of performance traditions, performed by different caste groups, flourished all over Andhra, with support from the kings to the commoners, from religious savants to aesthetes. The form under study here, Bhagavata Mela Natakam of Kuchipudi is also a part of this broader tradition.

As we have already observed, Kuchipudi is a village on the bank of Krishna river, inhabited mostly by Brahmins. The earliest reference to the performance tradition from this place is to be found in the historical record known as *Machupalli Kaifiat* (1502 A.D.). It is believed that a troupe from the village, presented a performance before the king of Vijayanagar, Immadi Narasa Nayaka, in which they represented how they were suffering under the cruel rule of the local chieftain. Impressed by their performance, the king is said to have delivered them from the cruel chieftain (Kothari, 2001, 31).

The land of Kuchipudi was sanctioned to the Brahmin families by the Nawab of Golkonda, Abdul Hassan Tahnishah, in 1678 A.D., when he saw the performance of these families, during his visit to Musalipatnam. There are also references to a partition deed of 1763 A.D. and several other revenue documents in which sixteen families of Kuchipudi are mentioned (Anuradha, 1996, 39–42; Kothari S. and A. Pasricha, 2001, 33). All these dates indicate that this genre of dance-drama must have evolved and reached a stage of maturity around fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The incident related to the Machupalli Kaifiat demonstrates how, this ritualistic form, depicting the story of Krishna's life, was also capable of reacting to contemporary social exigencies (like any other art form, traditional or modern).

The development of *Bhagavatam*, particularly of Kuchipudi is closely associated with the name of Siddhendra Yogi, the saint who is believed to have lived in fourteenth-fifteenth centuries. Different scholars have dated him from 13th to 17th C., A.D. though it is difficult to assert his time with

accuracy. He is said to have authored the playscript *Bhama Kalapam* and to have taught this dance-drama to the Brahmin families in Kuchipudi. There are many myths and legends regarding the life of Siddhendra Yogi. At that time, the area surrounding Srikakulam (the erstwhile capital of Kakatiyas) was suffused with the spirit of the Bhakti movement, specially the Krishna cult. Jayadeva's *Geeta Govinda*, composed in the neighbouring Orissa region, also held a wide sway in this area. Siddhendra Yogi is supposed to belong to the lineage of Narayana Teertha. Another important figure who worked for the spreading the Madhva cult was Narahari Tirtha, who acted as the regent of the young prince at Srikakulam.

According to one version of the legend, that is commonly accepted, Siddappa was an orphan boy who was fond of dance and music.<sup>2</sup> He was married in his infancy but was suffused with love and devotion for Lord Krishna. He was sent to Udupi for higher learning by the head of the *math*, as Udupi was the great centre of Madhva faith.<sup>3</sup> On his return, after completing his education, he had to cross the river which was in full spate, to reach his wife's house. In the middle of the river, he felt sure that he was going to drown. He had a revelation of Lord Krishna and decided to become a *sanyasi* and to devote his entire life for the propagation of Krishna cult. Providentially he was saved. "In an instant he understood that all human love, lust and sensual desire had to be sublimated to that of one great desire for God. He realised that he too was like Satyabhama, craving constant, eternal oneness with Krishna, the Supreme Being" (Acharya, 1992, 9). He is said to have composed a number of songs extolling the divine love of Satyabhama for Krishna.

Important from the perspective of the development of Kuchipudi, Siddhendra Yogi is believed to have taught this form of dance-drama to the Brahmin boys and to have taken an oath from them to continue the tradition and commit their male progeny for its continuance. That tradition has been continued even to this day by the Brahmin families settled in Kuchipudi.

Why did Siddhendra Yogi choose the Brahmin community to teach this dance-drama and to continue the tradition. The Brahmins were never considered a performing community and in Bharata's *Natya Shastra*, the performers are metaphorically equated with Shudras.<sup>4</sup> According to C.R. Acharya and Mrinalini Sarabhai it was to keep the purity of and devotion of the expression of *Bhakti*. "*Kalapam* [Siddhendra Yogi's songs about

Satyabhama], became very popular, especially with the temple dancers as they were lyrical and imbibed both the classical and the folk form. All the *devadasis* wanted to learn them. But Siddhendra, aware of the growing moral corruption amongst these women, thought they would be misinterpreted and misused by them to ensnare men. He decided to teach them to Brahmin boys who were devout students of the scriptures” (1992, 9).

It is believed that Siddhendra, took this group away from the settlement of Brahmins, and established a new village, to avoid criticism and possible social ostracisation. This village came to be known as Kuchelapuram—the village of travelling performers. This name was shortened to Kuchipudi in popular parlance.

### *Bhama Kalapam*

This is the first dance-drama of the Kuchipudi style. Written by Siddhendra Yogi himself, it deals with the varying emotions in the relationship between Krishna and his wife Satyabhama. It displays her varying emotions like love, jealousy, pride and *viraha* (pain of separation). *Kalapam* usually consists of two characters, a prime character and a confidant. In *Bhama Kalapam*, it is Satyabhama and her confidant Madhavi. The first entry of the character is from behind the hand-held curtain (which is called *Praveshika daru*), when Satyabhama throws her *jada*, the braid in front of the curtain. The decorations on the *jada* are supposed to represent the entire universe. It is also a challenge to any actor, who can perform the role of Satyabhama, better. The story revolves round the quarrel between Krishna and Satyabhama ending in reconciliation. There are interesting interpolations in the dialogues between Satyabhama and Madhavi. The performance begins with the preliminaries—called *purvaranga* in Sanskrit dramaturgy. They include invocatory prayers, consecration and decoration of the stage, welcoming the spectators, etc. The *Jarjara* (Indra’s flag) and the *Kuttilika* (curved stick) are also brought on the stage to protect the proceedings. All this is usually performed by the *sutradhara*. The *sutradhara* plays many roles in these dance-dramas as narrator, interpreter, actor, etc. This role is usually played by a senior actor.

These preliminaries point to the strong influence of Sanskrit dramaturgy on Kuchipudi dance-drama. There are also several versions of *Bhama Kalapam*, and each *guru* follows the text that he has received from tradition. This

performance has been famous for the male impersonation of Satyabhama's role and for the scope for *abhinaya* that the role provides. As Aruna Bhikshu points out, this was not merely the first Kuchipudi text, but perhaps the only text for quite some time. "*Bhama Kalapam* that centred on Lord Krishna's consort Satyabhama was the only popular text till the eighteenth century. In fact it is the performance of this text alone that won the acclaim of Abdul Hassan Tana Shah" (2006, 249-50). Commenting on the importance of *Bhama Kalapam*, in the continuation of Kuchipudi tradition as a whole, Kothari says:

Centering round the dance drama *Bhama Kalapam*, the tradition at Kuchipudi developed over the years. Bhakti remained is binding force. The Brahmin families inherited the legacy of dance-drama and music from the previous generation and passed it on to the next. The security provided by the land and maintenance allowed the *Bhagavatulu-s* to carry on their tradition, (2001, 35).

## OTHER PERFORMANCE TRADITIONS OF ANDHRA

It is not to be assumed that Kuchipudi as a performance genre existed or developed in isolation. As we have already observed, a great many performance genres existed in this region from very early times. Even during the period when Kuchipudi Bhagavatam originated and developed, many performance traditions were in existence. All these forms have interacted with and enriched one another as is only natural when they coexist. Even within the Bhagavatam tradition for example, Swapna Sundari, the famous Kuchipudi exponent, mentions nine different forms, each performed by a different caste group (2005, 20). Some of the major forms that had direct interaction with Kuchipudi, are described here in brief in order to understand how Kuchipudi enriched itself and developed drawing from these various forms.

### *Yakshagana*

Just as Yakshagana is the major genre of performance in Karnataka, in Andhra also it is the major form of dance-drama having a history of more than six hundred years. The word Yakshagana refers to the performing art as well as to the literary form. The earliest reference to Yakshagana in Andhra is found in the poet Srinatha's work in 1430.A.D. (Kothari, 2001, 29). The name of

*jakkulu* community is associated with this form.<sup>5</sup> Since that time, there have been a number of Yakshagana works, which make use of different metrical compositions set to different *raga* and *tala*. It received royal patronage as well, with several kings, being themselves composers. This form flourished in Tanjavur in Tamil Nadu as well under the Nayak rulers. In fact seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are considered as the golden age of Telugu Yakshagana. It also came to be recognised as a separate literary genre in Telugu literature and many works do not seem to be meant for performance. Apart from mythological themes, some works were based on historical themes. Works on folk heroes like Karibhanta and Sarangadhara are found in Kannada as well as in Telugu.<sup>6</sup>

As a performance, Telugu Yakshagana had both folk and classical elements. The Bhagavatamela of Brahmin performers, in the words of Kothari, “shaped the Yakshagana into a more stylised form, confirming to the tenets of Bharata’s *Natya Shastra*” (2001, 31). When the Kuchipudi *melas* were in search of new themes and texts, they took them from the existing corpus of Yakshagana texts. In fact there are said to be nearly 800 Yakshagana texts, though all of them have not been printed. There is no doubt that Yakshagana has influenced the performative aspects, specially the dramatic elements of Kuchipudi, apart from being a source for new texts. There were many performing traditions within Yakshagana and there was mutual influence between them points out Swapna Sundari. “Yakshaganams were also widely performed by dancers of other communities. It is possible that these various groups drew upon each other’s features to embellish their own presentations” (2005, 44).

#### *Pagati Vesham and other Forms*

Apart from Yakshagana, other genres of performance also existed in Andhra and these also have had a relation of give and take with Kuchipudi. Pagati vesham is a form in which the artists perform during the day time, usually on the streets. (In Sanskrit dramaturgy, they are named Bahurupi.) Apart from mythological themes, the emphasis is on picturing social problems in a satirical, humorous manner. Gaddipadu Agrahara, near Kuchipudi was famous for Brahmin performers. Many Kuchipudi artists were themselves performers of Pagati Vesham. In present day performances of Kuchipudi,



the influence of Pagati Vesham can be seen in some songs and in the performance of Ardhhanarishwara Vesham. In this, the same actor plays both Shiva and Parvati. Half the face has the make-up of Shiva and the other half of Parvati, with a veil separating the two halves.

Another form that was also performed during day time, on the streets, was Veethi Natakam, which also was a dance-drama form, but on a simpler scale because of the performative space. Kothari mentions a derivative of this form which emerged in the nineteenth century called Vithi Bhagavatam, which was performed at night and in which women usually from the courtesan communities also took part (2001, 88).

Though Kuchipudi was the preserve of only male artists, the parallel dance tradition of female performers was also in existence. This was the Nattuva Mela of *Bhogam Varu* and *Sani Varu* (as *Devadasis* were called in Andhra). Traditionally, these female dancers performed in temples and palaces, with emphasis on pure dance sequences (*nritya*). There was a constant interaction between these dancers and the Bhagavatars of Kuchipudi, point out Acharya and Sarabhai. “Meanwhile ritual dances continued in the temples as they did in the palaces. There was an exchange of knowledge between the *devadasis*, the *rajanartakis* and the *bhagavatars* and a lot of *nritya*, dance from the former styles was taken and reinterpreted for the *natakam*. Solo pieces such as *padams* and *shabdams* were also introduced into the *natakam*” (1992, 20). When Kuchipudi emerged as a solo form in the twentieth century, the inspiration came from Nattuva Mela points out Aruna Bhikshu, a leading Kuchipudi exponent (Personal interview).

Another Brahminical tradition of dance-drama can be found in the Bhagavata Mela Nataka of Melattur in Tamil Nadu. It is performed in Sanskritised Telugu language and the form is believed to have existed in six villages around Melattur. These Brahmin communities are supposed to have migrated to Tanjavur region during the reign of the Nayakas in sixteenth century A.D. Venkatarama Shastri authored twelve dance-dramas, including *Prahlada Charitam* and *Usha Parinayam*, which are performed even to this day. Regarding the relation between this form and Kuchipudi, Kothari says that the Bhagavata Mela Natakam is, “an offshoot of the Kuchipudi dance-drama tradition” and that it “shares many features which are common to both the forms” (2007, 87). There are also references as to how, new scripts and certain compositions were introduced into Kuchipudi dance-drama from Bhagavata

Melas by Hari Madhavayya (Anuradha, 1993, 12). This is an example of how, the influence flowed back to Kuchipudi from Melattur. All the forms mentioned here coexisted in the same geographical and cultural region, around the same time and so it was only natural that there was considerable exchange of artistic inputs amongst them.

### THE FLOWERING OF TRADITION

As we have observed in our study of other forms, no living tradition remains static or frozen. It goes on emerging, acquiring new features and altering subtly what has been received from the past. This process of the flowering of tradition, its transition and in the last half a century or more, a significant breakaway from the past, is divided into three phases by Anuradha Jonnalagadda, a leading performer and teacher of Kuchipudi.

- Phase 1 of Yakshaganas 1880s to 1930s
- Phase 2 Transition—the emergence of solo forms 1930s to 1956
- Phase 3 Modern Period—crystallisation of solo form; the growth of modern dance-drama; 1956 onwards.

(Anuradha, 1996, 45).

In the eighteenth century itself, the tradition of Kalapam was augmented with the addition of a new text *Golla Kalapam* by Bhagavatulu Ramiah. This was a nonmythological script, which consisted of two characters, a Brahmin and a milkmaid and the sharp repartee between them on aspects like the Vedas, sacrifice, *yagna*, etc. Through the milkmaid, it highlights the utter futility of distinctions based on caste or creed, emphasising on oneness as advocated in the Advaita philosophy. Along with *Bhama Kalapam*, this play was also equally popular with the traditional audience, points out Kothari. “In the villages, *Golla Kalapam* still finds favour with the audiences. The Kuchipudi *bhagavatulus* are *Smarta Advaitins* in their religious creed, therefore this Kalapam has found favour with them. It is also performed in Veethi Bhagavatam form” (2001, 63).

*Process of Transition in the Past*

Changes began taking place in Kuchipudi in the second half of nineteenth century itself due to the changing sociopolitical situations. With the establishment of the British rule, the patronage that the form had received from the ruling elite, became a thing of the past, though private patronage from the remnants of feudalism continued on a limited scale (Anuradha, 2006, 270). Another challenge came in the form of new drama troupes, specially the ones from Dharwar in Karnataka and the Parsi troupes. Inspired by them, new *Nataka Samajas* (drama troupes) came into existence in Andhra as well.

In order to overcome this challenge and to find new patronage from public support, Kuchipudi artists themselves began to form troupes called *melam*. Each family group had its own *melam* like Pasumartivari Melam and Chintavari Melam (Bhikshu, 2006, 250). It goes to the credit of Chinta Venkataramayya that he brought different families together under the banner of Venkatarama Natya Mandali and toured extensively in the early part of the twentieth century (Kothari, 2001, 38). In 1940s, another troupe, Prabhakar Dance Party, toured extensively and it included artists like Pasumarti Krishnamurthy and Vedantam Raghaviah. One result of these efforts was that Kuchipudi had succeeded in spreading to other regions beyond coastal Andhra. As Swapna Sundari says, “Kuchipudi dance which was called *Bhagavatam* at this time, had already begun to move out of the area of its origin by the time that the National Academies were established in the 50s” (2005, 18).

These developments also forced the need for new themes and scripts. Many new plays were taken from the vast storehouse of Yakshagana literature and were adapted. Chinta Venkataramiah added Yakshagana plays like *Bhakta Pahlada* which was first performed by his troupe around 1875 (Anuradha, 1996, 115). *Usha Parinaya* originally written by Chidambara Kavi was adapted to Kuchipudi by Vedantam Pahlada Sharma and Satyanarayana Sharma. We have already observed how some scripts were taken from Bhagavata Mela Nataka of Tamil Nadu by Hari Madhavayya.<sup>7</sup>

As the Kuchipudi troupes were trying to compete with the drama companies, the emphasis in these new efforts, was more on *Vachikabhinaya*, dialogues. The aspect of dance specially *nritta* (pure dance) no doubt continued but the performances became more drama than dance. There

was also an overall change in presentation techniques, with the introduction of painted scenery, sets, lighting, etc.

Around 1940s there also began to emerge the trend of solo performances. Vedantam Lakshminarayana Shastri and his son, travelled all over India giving solo performance with emphasis on *abhinaya* and *nritya*. Chinta Venkataramayya had already introduced solo dance sequences as *Natya Pallavi* and *Jati Vidhanam* into Kuchipudi dance-dramas (Swapna Sundari, 2005, 17). Vempati Pedda Satyam inspired by the performances of Udaya Shankar and Ram Gopal, began performing solo forms with two male artists, around 1940s. It is also mentioned that the first female performer was an artist named Saudamini in Pedda Sathyam's troupe (Anuradha, 1996, 135).

Another important development around this period was that many of the performers began to move out of the village to different towns and cities in Andhra and outside in search of livelihood and better prospects. Aruna Bhikshu mentions towns like Eluru, Hyderabad, Vijayawada, Rajamahendravaram, Vishakhapatnam and of course Madras, where many teachers established training centres (2006, 252). Some of them joined the film industry in Madras as choreographers. They settled down as *gurus* and began teaching dance. The result of this spreading out was that for the first time, this form began to be taught to pupils belonging to different caste groups. Even earlier such efforts were made by teachers like Bhagavatulu Vissayya who taught the *devadasis* and Vempati Paradesi who taught the Scheduled Caste students around Kuchipudi itself. As a result of such efforts, "an art form which had purely been the property of Brahmin males was now extended to other communities" (Bhikshu, 2006, 251). (This movement was continued by Vedantam Lakshminarayana Shastri, who taught this art to female students as well.) Another major shift that took place, as the teachers began imparting teaching of this form in different towns and cities was that a large number of women also began learning this form. This major development will be discussed later in this chapter.

These are the developments in which Anuradha Jonnalagadda calls phase 1 and 2 of the process of transition. This phase demarcates the period immediately prior to the time when it gained national recognition as a classical dance form. The developments discussed above point out how, changes had begun taking place in the form as a response to new challenges like the decreasing patronage, the migration towards towns in search of livelihood,

opening the form to new constituencies both as artists and spectators, the challenge posed by drama troupes, etc. All these developments point out how modernity and related challenges had forced the artists to rescribe the received tradition, to cope with the changing sociopolitical scenario. The radical changes that we witness in the next phase, like the participation of women, the emergence of a solo form etc., also had their beginnings during this period.

### RESURGENCE OF KUCHIPUDI

The decades of 1940s and 50s are usually considered the period of Renaissance of traditional Indian dance. It was a period of revivalism, when many forms in different parts of India, were ‘revived’ by the efforts of scholars and nationalists as a counter to the colonial discourse in an effort to establish the national identity in the field of culture, particularly the performing arts. We have seen earlier how the efforts of persons like Rabindranath Tagore, Rukmini Devi Arundel, Vallathol and others succeeded in gaining recognition to different forms like Manipuri, Bharatnatyam and Kathakali at the national level.

These efforts continued in the first few decades after independence as well. The effort was now to, “foster and develop Indian dance, Drama, Music and Films and to promote through them the cultural unity of the country”.<sup>8</sup> For this purpose, three academies were established by the central government and the first National Dance Seminar was organised by the Sangeet Natak Akademi in March 1958. This seminar and the one held in 1959 in Hyderabad by Andhra Sangeet Natak Akademi were to have far reaching effect on the form that is recognised today as Kuchipudi, but in opposite ways as we shall soon see.

In the national seminar in 1958, four dance forms were given official recognition as ‘classical’ dance forms. These were Bharatanatyam, Kathakali, Manipuri and Kathak. In spite of the strong arguments put forward by the scholar Visa Appa Rao and the demonstration by Kanchanamala (disciple of Vedantam Lakshminarayana Shastri), Kuchipudi did not succeed in getting the classical status.

This disappointment led to the holding of Kuchipudi Natya Seminar in 1959 under the auspices of Andhra Pradesh Sangeet Nataka Akademi. This

seminar created a forum where the entire spectrum of Kuchipudi performance could be displayed by the artists. Scholars like Visa Appa Rao, Banda Kanakalingeshwara Rao, A. Tandava Krishna and others spoke on the history and development of this art form. It was resolved to work towards claiming for Kuchipudi, a classical status on par with other forms of India that had gained this recognition. It was also decided to start a training centre. The Siddhendra Natya Kalakshetra was started in 1961 at Kuchipudi and two other places as a result of these efforts. As Aruna Bhikshu points out, "This seminar stands as a milestone in the history of Kuchipudi... It also prompted writings on the history, form and content of the dance" (2006, 252).

Due to the efforts of the scholars as well as the artists (from traditional and nontraditional communities), a spirit of revivalism set in and in due course, Kuchipudi succeeded in getting recognition at the national level. But one major development in postindependent India, after the formation of different states on the basis of language, was that these dance forms began to be perceived and projected as representing the cultures of the particular regions and linguistic groups. Such an attitude has led to parochialism rather than a national vision of dance in India, argues Swapna Sundari. "The projection of performing arts on language and state-specific considerations, promoted a limited rather than a holistic understanding of these. Unfortunately, such a limited perception continues to prevail in the collective Indian psyche even today" (2005, 17). In the effort to gain national recognition, Kuchipudi was also projected as representative of Telugu culture. Similar moves were afoot in different parts of India, with regard to traditional forms that could stake claim to classical status. If in preindependent India, the attempt by the early pioneers was to project a 'national culture' as a counter to the colonial discourse, post independence, the emphasis shifted to the assertion of each linguistic and cultural group. Bhaskar Roy, for example commenting on how there is no unifying symbol of India as a nation now, says, "The politics of consensus has been replaced by identity politics" (Roy, 2003, 253). As a result, 'national culture' now began to be perceived as a conglomerate of these disparate identities and aspirations rather than as a monolith, representing the entire nation. This important shift in the perception of what constitutes 'national culture', in postindependent India, is not indicated in Swapna Sundari's comment.

*The Politics of 'classical' status*

In our study of Yakshagana, we saw how categorisation of an art form as 'classical' can become a highly contentious issue. It is often naively assumed that the inherent qualities of an art form, its sophistication, the rules and stipulations (*shastra*) regarding different facets of the art (preferably in the form of written texts rather than in oral tradition), a long unbroken tradition etc., decide its classical status or otherwise.

But in this process of claiming or ascribing a classical status to an art form, certain crucial questions remain unanswered: who is the authority that decides on the status of an art form; are these decisions value free and neutral; to what extent are the decisions conditioned by the caste group and position of the performers in the caste hierarchy etc. These and a host of related questions are neither articulated nor answered. Such issues make it clear that 'classicalising' an art form is a highly contentious issue that is conditioned by sociopolitical pressures which mould our response to the crucial question—what is culture.

One of the presumed requisites in getting a classical status is that the form should be related to the Sanskritic tradition—in the case of performing arts to Bharata's *Natya Shastra*<sup>9</sup>. In the case of Yakshagana, we saw how many artists and scholars are now searching for and many a time 'inventing' such a lineage. The same process was at work during the phase of revivalism of Kuchipudi as well. Look at the following statements by two of the doyens of Kuchipudi, Vedantam Lakshminarayana Shastri and Vempati Chinna Satyam, who have been instrumental in shaping the contemporary form of Kuchipudi. Vedantam is quoted to have said, "Yes, *Natya Shastra* is dramaturgy. The solo system of Bharatanatyam, Manipuri, Orissi, Kathakali are names given by us. All these evolved out of *Natya Shastra*. Our Kuchipudi too. But we haven't improved it. So it is still in the primary stage. Ours was a village. We had no opportunity to see other kinds of dance. This too prevented our proper development" (Andavilli Sathyanarayana and P. Surya Rao, 1994, 8). Apart from relating Kuchipudi and other dance forms to *Natya Shastra*, the statement also points out another prerequisite for attaining a classical status—that the art form should have the backing and support of urban middle class and intelligentsia. Vempati Chinna Satyam also states how his work drew inspiration from *Natya Shastra*:

Right from the early period of my life, I believed that Kuchipudi dance is deeply rooted in the Natya Shastra tradition. This made me go back again and again to the grammar of Natya Shastra and improve my grasp of the art theoretically and also in translating it into performance (Bhikshu 2006, 258).

We should also realise that this trend of relating the contemporary form of the art to the Sanskritic tradition, was witnessed in several dance forms all over India in the years after independence. This search for Sanskritic lineage can also be related to the process of Brahminisation. All the issues mentioned above exemplify how determining the status of an art form—classical, folk, modern etc.—is not an ‘innocent’ issue of categorisation but is a contested terrain.

#### EMERGENCE OF CONTEMPORARY KUCHIPUDI

Kuchipudi, as we have observed, originated and developed in a rural setting in coastal Andhra. The performers were all men belonging to the Brahmin community and they performed dance-dramas that emphasised on the depiction of Bhakti. The performances were also noted for the female impersonation by male actors, specially the role of Sathyabhama.

But the Kuchipudi of the present has broken away from this tradition of the past in such marked ways that it would not be wrong to call it a rupture. The dance-drama of the past, with emphasis on *Vachikabhinaya* has now become solo dance form; if only men performed in the past, it is now mostly dominated by women performers; from only Brahmin performers it now has performers belonging to all castes and communities. The performative space has shifted from the villages to towns and cities and even to the international sphere. This transformation began in 1940s and in the next few decades it took a definite shape and codified form. What we recognise as Kuchipudi dance today evolved during this period, though it derived most of the inputs from the tradition of the past.

#### *Dance-drama to Solo Dance*

This process of re-scribing took place in Kuchipudi in the last half a century and the first break from tradition was the emergence of solo form of dance out of dance-drama of the past. This shift has become so well established



now, that Kuchipudi of the present is most often recognised only as solo dance. (Even Kuchipudi dance-drama of the present has broken away from the past in marked ways but that will be dealt with in the following pages). This shift to the solo form is described by Kothari as “the first major innovation” (Anuradha, 1996, 151).

Several reasons can be ascribed for this change. One immediate cause was the dwindling patronage. The huge cost and organisational problems in travelling with an entire troupe must have also acted as a disincentive. In the words of Aruna Bhikshu, “The changing social, political and economic scenario around the lives of the practitioners and mainly the lack of patronage... must have worked as the stimulus for this creative metamorphosis” (2006, 255). Lack of opportunity and search for better prospects led many artists to join different drama troupes or the film world (Kothari, 2001, 38). The inspiration for the solo form came from the examples of the success of *nattuvamela*. The Kuchipudi artists were also aware of the developments that were going on in Bharatanatyam and how it had created a niche for itself in the cultural space in the urban milieu. This change was necessitated not merely for the survival of the art form but also of the artists themselves, points out Aruna Bhikshu (personal interview). Certain elements that lent themselves for solo performance were taken from the traditional performance material. These were redesigned to suit the new need of solo performance. Certain new items were choreographed and added to create the solo Kuchipudi repertoire.

The great mentor who was instrumental in designing the solo form was Vedantam Lakshminarayana Shastri. He trained his son to perform *lasya natika* (graceful dance) and choreographed several solo numbers. He included several *nritya* numbers and the most typical Kuchipudi number now, *Tarangam*, in which a dancer balances himself on the rim of a brass plate (Kothari 2001, 38 and 158). He also taught *abhinaya* to several Sanskrit *slokas* and included several numbers like *padams* and *javalis* in the solo repertoire. The pair of father and son toured all over India giving performances. One of the students of Vedantam Lakshminarayana Shastri, Nataraja Ramakrishna explains how Vedantam adapted the elements of dance-drama to the needs of a solo form. “What Sastrigaru did was to sharpen it, give it a greater projection through public performances” (Bhikshu, 2006, 255).

This shift from dance-drama to solo dance also meant a shift in what the

dancer 'represented'. From representing a character in dance-drama, the dancer also has to become the narrator in the solo form. If the lyric has several characters, the dancer, has to represent these roles along with being a narrator.

Another development out of the solo dance was the emergence of duets, where two dancers perform together. Vedantam and his son were also the pioneers in starting this trend. During 1940s, Vempati Pedda Satyam, inspired by Udaya Shankar and Ram Gopal popularised duets with two male dancers. As more and more women became performers in Kuchipudi, the role of the male dancer was also redefined and given a new projection. If they were known for female impersonation in the traditional format, they now began to take virile Yakshagana roles and began to perform with female dancers in duos. (Korada Narasimha Rao made a name for himself in such virile roles as Bhasmasura, Hiranyakashipu etc.) The trend of male and female duets has been continued by dancers like Raja and Radha Reddy, Vanisri and Jaya Rama Rao and others. As a result of this innovation, Swapna Sundari adds, "...the presence of the male dancer in Kuchipudi continues albeit in a modified way" (2005, 168).

Succeeding *gurus* and artists have added their own contributions to the flowering of the solo dance form. This process is going on even today. The emergence of the solo form stands as a fine example of re-scribing where a new form has emerged out of the traditional format of dance-drama.

#### *Female impersonators to Female Performers*

Traditionally we have seen how Kuchipudi was performed only by men. In fact the form was famous for male artists who made great fame in performing female roles like Satyabhama.<sup>10</sup> Another important break from the past, which has changed the entire form, took place when women were inducted into Kuchipudi as artists. This process was also started by Vedantam Lakshminarayana Sastri himself. As Kothari says, "He was the first *guru* to train female dancers and introduce them to Kuchipudi in solo exposition" (2001, 158). In the past, we have observed how there was continuous interaction between the nattuvamela of *devadasis* and the Bhagavatars. But when the *gurus* moved out of their villages to different towns, they began teaching to students belonging to different castes and to female students.

The situation has changed so drastically today from the tradition of the past, that Kuchipudi is known mostly for its female dancers. For example, at a Kuchipudi festival organised by Central Sangeet Nataka Akademi in 1997, there were 56 female dancers and only 13 were male. Dancers like Yamini Krishnamurthy, Indrani Rehman, Uma Ram Rao, Sumati Kaushal, etc. were the first female artists who succeeded in creating a new identity for Kuchipudi. Many of these women artists have themselves become *gurus* imparting training to others.

As a result of this major reversal in the 'body' of the performer, the idiom of dance and body kinesthetics had to be changed accordingly. In the words of Aruna Bhikshu, "The performance in which the instrument was the male body had come to be expressed by female bodies. In other words, the imitation of the female bodies had been replaced by female bodies dancing themselves" (2006, 258). Such a change involved changes in every aspect of dance like body posture, gait, steps, etc. and what they represented. The traditional aspects of all these had been developed for the male body representing the female. Now they had to be rescribed and recoded to suit the female body<sup>11</sup>. This process of change was started by Vedantam Lakshminarayana Shastri himself when he began teaching the dance to female students. The process was continued by Vempati Chinna Satyam and other gurus, who realised the need to redefine the body kinetics. Look at the following comment by Anuradha J.:

These changes were warranted because the form earlier practiced by men, possessed more vibrancy than delicacy. Men impersonating female characters used to perform their abhinaya in a more pronounced and loud manner in order to bring in femininity to their role... [Some of these] have been curtailed since they do not go with female physique. Now it is more polished (1996, 148).

This shift from male to female performers was also related to and took place around the same time when the solo dance form emerged out of dance-drama. Most of the female dancers now are exponents of solo dance, though some are also engaged in the modern form of dance-drama as choreographers. This shift from the male body to the female body has also seen a total reversal of tradition with some women dancers now playing male roles. In the dance-dramas of Vempati Chinna Satyam, the roles of gods were many a time played by female dancers. Some dancers like Pratibha Prahlad and Aruna Bhikshu

have also made a name for their depiction of virile, masculine roles. With such a development, we can say that the reversal of gender has now reached a full circle. The reinterpretation and adoption of the traditional dance to the female body and the challenge it poses are summed up by Kapila Vatsayan. “The problem of transferring a technique that was evolved for the male body to impersonate female, to be articulated again through the female, presents complex kinesthetical problems. These are challenges which a Kuchipudi dancer faces, meets and overcomes in a successful performance” (Foreword, Acharya, 1992).

The two forms of re-scribing described above—of the emergence of solo form and the entry of women—have so drastically altered Kuchipudi of the present, that its roots in the earlier traditional form are often hard to decipher. Swapna Sundari sums it up succinctly:

In the following decades, Koochipudi, reincarnated in solo form, swept the imagination of the country. Accomplished exponents strengthened this aspect further with individual inputs, often highlighting one aspect or another. Today, Koochipudi is most widely pursued in the solo form by female dancers from nontraditional families. So strong is this identity that the older *Bhagavatam* tradition, from which it was culled, is almost forgotten (2005, 26).

#### *Emergence of new dance-drama*

When Kuchipudi emerged as solo dance, naturally the earlier form of dance-drama faced the danger of extinction. It was rarely performed anywhere outside the traditional rural setting. Acutely aware of this loss, many artists and scholars made a conscious attempt to resuscitate the dance-drama form. What emerged out of this revivalistic attempt, was a new form of dance-drama, more like a ballet and very different from the *Bhagavatam* or *Yakshagana* of old. This form has gained acceptance and popularity now. Many new experiments are being done in this style dealing with mythological, historical and even modern themes.

The first attempt at creating a new dance-drama was also attempted by Vedantam Lakshminarayana Shastri, but it can be said to have come of age in the productions of Vempati Chinna Satyam. He drew inspiration from the ballets of Kalakshetra in Chennai. He was greatly thrilled, as he himself says, by Kamala Lakshman’s Bharatanatyam performance, which he saw for the

first time in Madras. What impressed him most was the perfection in her dance (Sathyanarayana, 1994, 5). He got the first opportunity to put his creative ideas into practice in the production of *Sri Krishna Parijatham* for a college in Kavali, Andhra Pradesh (1957). The script was written by S.V. Bhujangaraya Sarma, with whom Vempati developed a life long relationship, as he wrote the librettos for most of his future dance-dramas.

The turning point in Vempati's career as a choreographer and of Kuchipudi dance-drama as a whole, was the performance of *Ksheerasagara Madhanam* in Vijayawada in 1962. Such acclaimed artists as Yamini Krishnamurthy (Mohini), Vedantam Suryanarayana Sarma (Dhanvantri) took part in it. Chinna Satyam himself played the role of Shiva. Several new innovations were attempted, like getting rid of *Vachikabhinaya*, dances set to lyrics, the use of simple sets, lighting etc. These changes have almost set the trend for all future dance-dramas. With this production, "started the era of innovations in Kuchipudi dance-dramas, with new themes, structure and performance. It showed the potential of Kuchipudi dance technique and the great scope for innovations that the tradition provides one with" says Anuradha J. (1996, 136).

Vempati continued choreographing other dance-dramas which were given the name *nrityanatika*. Apart from productions like *Srinivasa Kalyanam* and *Shiva Dhanur-bhangam*. *Hara Vilasam*, etc. he also tried new themes like Rabindranath Tagore's play *Chandalika*. He made use of mimes and folk elements apart from laying greater emphasis on *nritta* and *nritya*. He has been one of the great pioneers of modern Kuchipudi, having also trained thousands of students in his Kuchipudi Art Academy in Chennai, which was started in 1963.

Apart from Vemati Chinna Satyam, many other artists have also successfully produced the new dance-dramas. Mention may be made of some early attempts like *Megha Sandesham* by Nataraja Ramakrishna, *Sita's Daughters* by Mallika Sarabhai and *Matsya* by Avanti Medurai<sup>12</sup>. These new dance-dramas have gained popular acceptance. New productions are done regularly by most of the reputed artists though not many see repeat performances.

### *New Themes, New Experiments*

Since the middle of the twentieth century, new themes and experiments have been tried in Kuchipudi. Andhra Praja Natya Mandali had produced

Yakshaganams on contemporary themes like *Hitler Patanam*, on the fall of Hitler and *Shimla Bhagavatam* dealing with the talks regarding partition and independence held at Shimla. Succeeding artists have tackled mythological, historical, social and even abstract themes in Kuchipudi idiom. They have even given new interpretations to traditional themes. Attempts have also been made to present these dance-dramas in different Indian languages. For example, Swapna Sundari has produced ballets in Hindi, Vyjayanti Kashi has done them in Kannada. Experiments have even been made in the use of English. Rama Bharadwaj, settled in U.S.A., made innovative use of Kuchipudi in her production of *Panchatantra*. At the same time, Leela Venkataraman feels that there is scope for more experimentation. “Kuchipudi has not been harnessed to daringly new themes. Visual attraction and rhythmic excitement are what it thrives on” (2002, 138).

This does not mean that experiments and innovations are limited only to the choice of themes. Swapna Sundari points out how the traditional dance unit-*adavu*, was given an unusual and interesting treatment in one production (2005, 175). Vempati himself had used ballet like movements to picturise river Ganga (Anuradha, 2006, 274).

Today’s artists are in the search for a contemporary relevance and want to use Kuchipudi for the expression of these modernist urges. To take a few instances, Aruna Bhikshu’s production of *Rudrama Kalapam* dealt with the historical figure of a valorous queen, who even had an all women army. Her intention was to convey a strong feminist message. Vyjayanti Kashi, another leading exponent, explains how she searches for contemporary significance even while depicting mythological roles:

I am an artist of today. I can not become a woman of the past. I can only respond to the past from today’s point of view. Being a woman of today, I can not be satisfied with Satyabhama’s quarrel with Krishna... My Sita will have the costumes, gait, etc. of the past. But I can respond to her predicament only as a woman of 21st century. The tradition has the potentiality of creating new meanings. I should know how and what. That is my search as an artist (Personal interview).

## CONCLUSION

Kuchipudi has also responded to the challenges of globalisation. The corporate sector has emerged as a new patron, though the support is more

to established 'stars'. Special Kuchipudi performances were designed for occasions like World Chess Championship, International Coffee Day, etc. Today it is being taught not merely in the major cities across India but also in many centres abroad. Recently (July 2008) more than 300 Kuchipudi dancers performed together on the same stage for nearly eight minutes in U.S.A. This incident was perhaps a symbolic demonstration of how this art form has travelled from a small village in coastal Andhra to the international arena. The radical changes that have taken place in this form during the past half a century, have enabled it in gaining this recognition in India and abroad. The reincarnation of Kuchipudi from the earlier Bhagavatam, stands as an extreme example of the re-scribing of tradition. We can end this study with the words of Anuradha J., where she emphasises the need for change and also the caution about the path the changes have to take:

Dance as a performing art is undergoing radical transformation all over the world. New innovations are being made to meet the serious challenges posed by fast changing times... Both in terms of content and technique, the earlier modes are giving place to new ones. In this scenario, the Kuchipudi art form should also change to incorporate the spirit of the times as it has responded to such developments in the past. There is a need particularly at this juncture of time, for exponents of Kuchipudi to come together, take stock of the situation and prepare an agenda for the future (1993, 18).

## NOTES

1. The earliest references to dance traditions in Andhra go back to the Buddhist period. The most ancient reference found is the Amaravati stupa of 2nd century B.C. (Kothari and Parsicha, 2001, 23).
2. Swapna Sundari mentions many other legends regarding Siddhendra Yogi including the one which says that he was born as a muslim boy, Syed Ali (2005, 31).
3. Udupi, apart from being the centre of Madhva faith (and renowned for the Krishna temple), is also the centre of Yakshagana activities in Karnataka. Relating Siddhendra Yogi's learning in Udupi, and his love for dance-drama, Shivarama Karanth, the authority on Karnataka Yakshagana, had surmised that Siddhendra Yogi might have learnt this art form in Udupi along with his study of *Vedas* and *Shastras* (1975, 130). There is no corroborative evidence to support his surmise. R.V.S. Sundaram does not agree with Karanth regarding this surmise (1985, 26).

4. In the *Natya Shastra*, it is mentioned that the hundred sons of Bharata, in their performance make fun of the risis who angrily curse Bharata's sons to be born as *Shudras*. This can be taken as a metaphor indicating the social position ascribed to performers in the traditional Indian society.
5. Swapna Sundari discusses the possible links between Yakshagana, Jakkulu and Kuruva tribes (2005, 37-40).
6. R. V. S. Sundaram has done a fine comparative analysis of Karnataka and Andhra Yakshagana in his book, *Karnataka Andhra Yakshagana Samiksha*, 1985.
7. *Gajendra Moksha* is one such script that Hari Madhaviah drew from the Melattur repertoire. Later artists and gurus like Korada Narasimha Rao and C.R. Acharya have adapted many themes from the *Puranas*.
8. Excerpts from the inaugural speech by Justice P.V. Rajamannar, Chairman, Sangeet Natak Akademi in March 1958 (quoted in Swapna Sundari, 2005, 13).
9. Most of the traditional performing genres of India whether classical or folk, share certain common features like *Purvaranga* (preliminaries performed before the actual performance), invocation to the deities, *Mangala* (auspicious ending), etc. These have been codified by Bharata in *Natya Shastra*. This facilitates the search for a Sanskrit lineage, specially for those forms that stake a claim to a classical status.
10. An artist like Vedantam Satyanarayana Sharma brought fame and recognition to the art of female impersonation through his *abhinaya* in roles like Satyabhama and Usha.
11. Male impersonation of female characters, is a tradition followed in other South Indian dance-drama traditions analysed earlier, Yakshagana, Kathakali and Terukkuttu. In my analysis of how the female roles are performed by men, in Yakshagana I have commented on the mindset in operation. "[Some aspects like body posture gait, gestures, etc. adopted by these actors] may be attributed to what can be termed 'gender-identity crisis'. In order to establish their femininity, they try to imitate not the women of the mythical past but the women they see in society... Even in their acting, most actors, playing these female roles, use the stereotyped female gestures... This is clearly the result of gender identity, where in attempt to overemphasise the femininity, they end up projecting the stereotype of women which is again a construct of male psychology" (Bapat, 1998, 165).
12. Mention may also be made of the revival of Yakshaganam by Korada Narasimha Rao, Uma Rama Rao and others.



## CONCLUSION

Culture change is now emerging as an important domain of enquiry in the social sciences. It is now being perceived how culture change becomes an important marker expressive of different social aspirations, compulsions and paradoxes. It also provides important insights into the culture making processes, whereby individuals as well as groups are negotiating with the challenges of modernity. Scholars are also looking at ways in which the conception of past, of tradition, is constructed in the crucible of the present. When this construct of the past, emanates from the urban, educated elites, it also becomes a discourse of power, privileging some and disprivileging others, creating hierarchies within cultural forms of expression. Almost all cultural forms that have a long history, are now undergoing this process of re-scribing whereby they try to retain their relevance in the contemporary context.

This study has focussed attention on this process of change in four traditional dance-drama forms of South India. All four share many common features and all four have undergone the process of re-scribing in the 20th century. (This process is continuing in the present century as well). But the directions of changes have been markedly different. Each of these forms has existed in a different social, cultural setting and so the challenges they faced were also different. Kathakali survived under the patronage of royal courts and feudal powers; Yakshagana and Terukkuttu survived on the support of the rural masses with backup from temples; Kuchipudi survived in a small village in coastal Andhra, though the Brahmin artists were also itinerant performers. The destabilising forces of modernity, have deeply affected all these forms. But the particularities of each region, language and cultural zone being different, the challenges faced by these dance-dramas were also different. As a result, each form has charted a different path in its process of re-scribing. Along with region specific sociopolitical conditions, the genius

of each form, its aesthetic perspective, the inputs by the artists, patrons and supporters (including governmental and nongovernmental agencies), have defined the different courses taken by these forms.

The entire modality through which tradition negotiates with the challenges brought about by modernity and undergoes a process of change, is termed 're-scribing' in this study. As explained in the introduction, re-scribing encompasses the entire process through which a given tradition redefines itself in response to the changed/changing conditions. In the case of performing arts, re-scribing includes not merely the artistic aspects that are projected through the performance on the stage, but also factors that are usually considered 'extraneous'—like the performative context, the performative space, the patrons, the composition of spectators—in fact the sum total of all those inputs that go into the making of a performance and its meaning. This process of re-scribing is differentiated from 'the invention of tradition' (Hobsbaum and Ranger, 1983), where historical antecedents are 'invented' in order to fabricate a hoary past. On the other hand, re-scribing refers to the way in which existing traditions are negotiating with the new predicaments brought about by modernity. All the four forms under study here, have been in existence for centuries. But social, political, cultural changes engendered by modernity have forced all these forms to re-scribe themselves. This work is a study of how these forms have undergone a deep process of change in the last half a century or more.

Different compulsions and forces have been in operation in defining the various paths of re-scribing that these forms have taken. Culture is not a value-neutral territory as is often naively presumed. Just as social organisations and institutions reflect the value system of any given society, cultural forms of expression are also conditioned by and become expressive of the same value system. In the Indian context, with the mindset of creating a hierarchy of every aspect of life, cultural forms have also been hierarchised. This study has tried to unravel the politics of this hierarchical categorisations of forms as folk, classical, etc. and has analysed how such categorisations are dependent on factors like caste configuration of performers, the degree of Sanskritisation, the interest taken by urban elites, etc. This shows the hegemonic operation of power structures even in the domain of culture.

The process of revivalism, started during the colonial rule as a project of upholding our hoary tradition as a counter to the colonial discourse.

Revivalism itself was a product of modernity, as has been analysed in the first chapter. But in trying to relate to the past, the relationship these art forms had to the every day concerns of the performers and the society were neglected. The result was that these traditional forms began to be projected as 'pure' art forms having only an aesthetic appeal, obliterating all other facets of these forms. Another development of revivalism was that some forms got projected as representing 'national culture' (Bharatanatyam for example). But in this process, many other forms got relegated to a secondary status as 'regional', 'folk', etc. This study has elaborated on how the homogeneous, monolithic concept of national culture, has now come to be questioned with different castes, regions and languages staking their claim in the representation of nation and national culture. So, what constitutes national culture, has itself become a contested terrain, that has to accommodate the conflicting claims of all these groups. In such a changed scenario, the performing arts have also become reflective of these identity claims of caste, region, language, etc.

With such conflicting claims, the status of the art form also becomes 'destabilised', where differently positioned groups try to appropriate the form as well as the meanings generated by it. The rise of ritualism in the past decade, that has impacted some of the forms under study here, can also be related to the identity assertion of certain caste groups. These are only some of the social, political compulsions under which cultural forms are getting re-scribed now.

No study of the process of change of the present can afford to ignore the forces of globalisation, which have affected almost all aspects of our life. This is specially true of the traditional performing arts of India, which have now attracted the attention of western scholars and theatre practitioners. This study has tried to probe into how this interest has not merely created new opportunities, but is also playing a major role in the contemporary process of re-scribing. Specially in the case of forms like Kathakali (and Kudiattam) that have received the maximum western attention, the artists' own perception of their art form is also undergoing a change, because of the changing performative context, audience structuration, etc. Whether the western perception of these forms in search of the 'exotic', constitutes an extension of the orientalist mindset is another question that has been looked at.

Thus the process of re-scribing of the traditional performing arts is not a

simple question of change of techniques, themes or even performative contexts. This process is conditioned by all the social, political, religious, economic and aesthetic compulsions that are in operation in the Indian society now. This study has focussed attention on the four dance-drama forms of South India and an attempt has been made to understand how in this age of modernity and postmodernity, people negotiate with the past in order to shape their present and future through cultural forms of expression.

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## PLATES



## YAKSHAGANA



A scene from *Ravana Vadha* (The Slaying of Ravana) Rama (N. Anant Hegde) and Ravana (Keremane Shambhu Hegde)



A scene from *Sudhanvarjuna Kalaga* (The battle between Sudhanva and Arjuna) Sudhanva (B. Krishna Yaji) and Prabhavati (Mantapa P. Upadhya)



A scene from *Krishnarjuna Kalaga* (The battle between Krishna and Arjuna) Subhadra (Mantapa P. Upadhya), Arjuna (Chittani Ramachandra Hegde) and Abhimanyu (Kartik Chittani)



The clown (Sridhara Bhat, Kasarakod)

## KATHAKALI



*Purappadu* - The expository dance behind the hand held curtain



Hanuman (Prasanan)





Female Characters  
Kaikeyi (Rajashekharan) and Mandhara (Prasanan)



Duryodhana (Soorayan) and Krishna (Harinarayanan)



## TERUKKUTTU



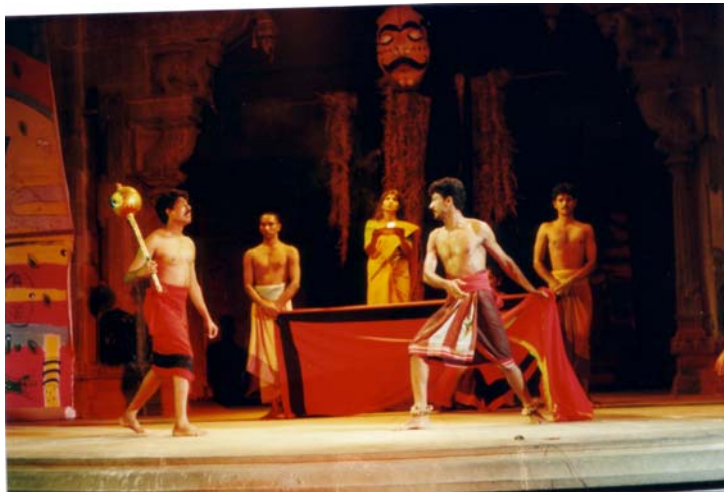
Koothu Artist - Make-up



Koothu Artist, climbing the tree, surrounded by village spectators.



Bending of the bow procession & Draupadi with maid woman



A modern play using elements of Terukkuttu  
A scene from Koothu Pattarai's production of Padukalam

## KUCHIPUDI



A scene from a modern dance-drama choreographed by Vyjayanti Kashi



Vyjayanti Kashi in a typical dance posture



Vjayanti Kashi



Female impersonation of a male character. Aruna Bhikshu in the role of Vrishabhasura.

## INDEX

- Abhinaya*, 65, 67, 68, 108, 114, 119  
Abdul Hassan Tanashah, 109  
Acharya & Sarabhai, 1.6,107,111  
*Adharama*, 34  
*Adavu*, 124  
A Day with the Masters, 72, 77  
*Advaita*, 112  
Akademi of Tenku Tittu Yakshagana, 52  
Alternative Modernity, 2  
*Amara Shilpi Kalkuda*, 31  
*Amarendra Vijaya*, 33  
Amruta Someshwara, 42  
Anand Lal, 20  
Andhra, 17, 109  
Andavilli Sathyanaryana & P.Surya Rao  
117  
Ahdhra Praja Natya Mandali, 123  
Andhra Pradesh, 104  
Andhra Sangeet Nataka Akademi, 115  
Ankalamman, 90  
Ankia Nat, 22  
Anuradha, 106, 112,113,121,123, 124  
Appadaurai Arjuna, 1,44  
Appu Kuttan, 56  
*Arati*, 26  
Aravan, 89  
*Ardhanarishwara Vesham*, 111  
Arjuna, 89  
*Arjuna's Penance*, 86  
Arundel, Rukmini Devi, 15  
Aryan-Brahimonical Tradition, 43  
Aryan, 61  
Ashley, Wayne, 18  
Ashton, Martha & Bruce Christie, 27  
Assam, 22  
Aswati, 64  
*Asthapadiattam*, 56  
*Attakatha*, 59  
Avanti Medurai, 123  
  
*Bahurupi*, 110  
Bakasura, 86  
Bakhtin, Mikhail, 96  
Balakrishnan, 58,68,79, 81  
Banda Kanakalingeshwara Rao 116  
Bapat Guru Rao, 6, 29, 65  
*Bappanadu Kshetra Mahatme*, 32  
Basavaraja Malashetty, 7  
Basaveshwara, 7  
Bauman, Richard, 44  
*Bayalata*, 10, 99  
Bengal, 22  
Bhabha, Homi, 22,90  
*Bhagavata*, 25, 27  
*Bhagavatam*, 106, 122  
*Bhagavatalu*, 109



- Bhagavata Mela Nataka of Melattur*, 111  
*Bhagavatars*, 111  
 Bhagavatalu Ramiah, 112  
 Bhagavatalu Vissayya, 114  
*Bhagavati*, 56  
*Bhakti*, 7, 8, 22, 23, 34, 42, 105, 118  
 Bhakti movement, 31  
 Balakrishnan, Sadanam, 81  
*Bhama Kalapam*, 107, 108  
 Bharadwaj, Rama, 124  
 Bharatanatyam, 6, 17, 46, 51, 55, 72, 85, 98, 115, 117, 119, 129  
 Bharata's *Natya Shastra*, 63, 107, 110, 117  
 Bharata Iyer, 65  
 Bharatham, 85  
 Bhat. P.V., 46  
 Bhat G.S., 49  
 Bhatia, Nanda, 72  
 Bharucha, Rustom, 20, 79, 80  
*Bhava*, 61, 67, 68  
*Bhavai*, 22  
*Bhikshu* Aruna, 6, 109, 111, 113, 116, 118, 121, 124  
 Bhima, 86  
 Bharata, 50, 60  
 Bhujangaraya Sarma S.V., 123  
*Bhuta*, 42, 44  
*Billavas*, 42  
 Boner Alice– 77  
*Brahmaswam*, 69  
*Brahmins, Brahminism*– 41, 42, 60, 61, 104  
*Brahmins (Agraharam)*-104  
*Brahminisation*, 101, 118  
 British Power, 69  
 Brook, Peter, 20  
 Buddhism, 104  
*Bunts*, 40  
 Calicut, 56, 64  
 Caste Configuration, 5  
 Caste hierarchy, 5  
 Caste Structure, 3  
 Centre for Kathakali, 74  
 Central Sangeet Natak Akademi, 17, 19, 121  
 Chalukyas, 104  
 Chennai, 97  
*Chakyar Koothu*, 57  
 Chanda, 59  
*Chande*, 25  
*Chandrasahsa Charitre*, 33, 35  
*Character type*, 11  
 Chattopadhyaya Kamala Devi, 71  
 Cheyar, 85  
 Chenda, 59  
*Cherutturutti*, 71  
 Chidambar Kavi, 113  
 Chinna Satyam, 123  
 Chinta Venkataramiah, 113  
 Chintavari Melam, 113  
*Chutti*, 59  
 Classical Arts, 6  
 Colonisation, 3  
 Colonial rule, 14  
 Commercialisation, 29, 45  
 Community Movement, 70  
 Commercial Troupes, 31  
 Cultural, 78  
 Cultural Change, 127  
 Damle, 32  
 Dance-drama forms, 5  
*Dasi Attam*, 98  
 Democratisation, 1  
 Democratic Policy, 3  
*Devadasi*, 104, 105, 120  
 De Bruin Hanne, 6, 84, 86, 88, 91, 93, 94, 95, 96, 98, 99, 100, 101, 102  
*Dharma*, 34, 37

- Draupadi, 88, 89  
 Dravidian, 61  
 Draupadi Amman, 85  
 Dharmaraya, 36, 86, 87  
 Duryodhana, 86, 87, 88  
 Dushyasana, 62, 88  
 Dustabuddhi, 35  
 Dutch, 60  
 Edwina Ranganathan, 97  
 Esmme Merten, 97  
 Ezhavas, 70  
  
 F.A.C.T. Kathakali School, 73  
 Feudal Structure, 12  
 Folk- heroes, 30  
 Frasca, Richard, 83, 87, 89  
  
*Gadayuddha*, 35, 36  
*Gadipadu Agrahara*, 110  
 Gargi Balwant, 83  
*Garuda*, 90  
*Garuda Purana*, 90  
*Gingee*, 85  
 Globalisation, 3, 19, 21, 81, 79, 95, 124, 129  
*Golla Kalapam*, 112  
 Govindan Kutty, 57  
 Grotowsky Jerzy, 20, 77  
 Guruvayur, 58  
 Gupta Dipankar, 22  
  
 Hand gestures, 67  
 Hanuman, 48  
*Harake-ata*, 26  
*Harake Mela*, 28  
 Hari Madhavayya, 112, 113  
 Harischandra, 48  
*Hasta Lakshana Deepika*, 63  
 Hegde S, 52  
 High Culture, 85  
  
 Hiltebeitel , Alf, 42  
 Hobsbaum and Ranger, 128  
 Hoysalas, 39  
 Hyder Ali, 65, 66  
  
 Identity Assertion, 20  
 Identity Politics, 17  
 Immadi Narasa Nayaka, 106  
 Improvised dialogue, 36  
 Indrani Rehman, 64  
 Irayimman, 64  
 International Centre for Kathakali in Delhi, 76  
 Invented tradition, 4  
 Invention of Tradition, 128  
 Iyyamgode Sridharan, 76  
  
 Jainism, 104  
 Jambe. C.R., 52  
*Jakkalu*, 110  
 Jarasandha, 35  
*Jarjara*, 108  
*Jatra*, 22  
 Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda*, 107, 108  
 Jaya RamaRao, 120  
  
 Kabir, 7  
*Kadalur*, 85  
 Kalamandalam Govindan Kutty, 74  
*Kalasams*, 68  
 Kaladharan V., 68, 74, 76  
 Kalakshetra, 97, 122  
*Kalladikkodan*, 68  
*Kalapam*, 107  
*Kalkuda*, 40  
*Kalaripayettu*, 58  
 Kalinga Navada, 27  
*Kaliyogams*, 71, 72  
*Kalyanasangandhikam*, 100  
 Kamala Lakshman, 37

- Kamsa, 48  
*Karna Moksham*, 84, 89  
 Kanchanamala, 115  
 Kanchipuram, 85, 101  
 Kannappa Tembiran, 95  
*Kaplingadan*, 68  
 Karantha B.V., 52  
*Karna*, 36, 84, 86, 90  
*Karna Parva*, 37  
 Karnataka, 6, 85  
 Karnataka Music, 6  
 Karma, 32  
*Karibhanta*, 110  
*Karuna*, 12  
 Kashi, 95  
 Kathak, 15, 17, 104, 115  
 Kathakali, 8, 9, 12, 13, 15, 17, 18, 21, 46, 47, 51, 53, 55-82, 84, 91, 115, 117, 127, 129  
*Katti*, 67  
*Kattai Chamanakal*, 98, 101  
 Kattaikoothu Kalai Valarchi, 96  
 Kattaikkuttu Sangam, 98, 100  
*Kattai Veshan*, 84  
*Kattain Karan*, 83, 84  
 Kaurava, 34, 37  
 Keladi, 39  
 Kerala, 22  
 Kerala People's Arts Club, 70  
 Kerala Kalamandalam, 68, 71, 77  
 Keremane Shambhu Hegde, 48, 83  
*Khandavavana Dahanam*, 100  
*Khol Do*, 75  
 Kichaka, 88  
 Kidangoor, 68  
*King Lear*, 76  
 King Mannaveda, 58  
*Koothamabalam*, 57  
*Koothandavar*, 89  
 Koothu Pattarai, 91  
 Kottarakara Thampuram, 59  
 Kothari, 109, 110, 111, 112, 119  
 Kothari S. & A. Pasricha, 106  
*Koti Chennaya*, 31, 40, 43  
 Krishna, 35, 36, 89, 107, 108  
 Krishnattam, 58, 61, 64  
*Krishna Balalile*, 35  
 Krishna Bhat Artikaje, 25  
*Krishna Sandhana*, 30, 40  
 Krishna Iyer. E., 91, 98  
*Ksatriyas*, 66  
*Kshetra Mahatme*, 31  
*Ksheerasagar Mathanam*, 123  
 Kuchelapuram, 108  
*Kuchipudi*, 9, 13, 17, 21, 23, 105-126, 127  
*Kudiattam*, 21, 61, 72, 77, 47, 68, 57, 58, 129  
*Kunju Kurup*, 71  
 Kumara Vyasa, 36  
*Kuravanji*, 89  
 Kurukshetra war, 35  
*Kuttilika*, 108, 109  
  
*Lila*, (divine play), 34  
*Loka Dharmi*, 68  
  
*Machupalli Kaifiat*, 106  
*Maddale*, 25  
 Madhava Chakryar, 57  
*Madhva cult*, 107  
 Madhavi, 108  
 Madras Presidency, 39  
*Mahabharata*, 56, 59, 83, 87, 89, 99  
*Mahakali Maghadendra*, 30  
 Manjushri, 62  
 Makkal T.V., 97  
 Malayalam, 59  
 Malayalam Society, 56  
 Mamool, 91  
 Manaveda Raja, 56



- Mangalore, 29  
*Mangala*, 25, 40, 84  
*Manava Vijayam (People's Victory)*, 76  
*Mani Pravalam*, 56  
 Manipuri, 15, 115, 117  
*Manishada*, 33  
 Marists, 81  
*Margi*, 73  
 Margi Vijayakumar, 80  
*Mariamman*, 90  
*Marimakkuttayam*, 70  
 Marquiz, 100  
*Matsya*, 123  
 Maya Rao, 48, 75  
*Megha Sandesham*, 123  
 Mellacceri, 85  
 Menon C.A., 56  
 Message of love, 76  
*Minukku (Shining)*, 65  
*Mohini Attam*, 57, 72  
 Modernisation, 2,4,14,28, 45  
 Modernity, 2, 4, 5, 32, 38, 49, 55, 74, 75, 91, 95, 100, 129, 127, 128, 130  
 Postmodernity, 129, 130  
 Moore Henrietta, 81  
*Mukha Veena*, 83  
*Munnetra Sangam*, 96  
*Mudalapaya*, 25  
*Mudra*, 11, 12, 48, 55  
 Mukunda Raja, 71  
 Multi Culturism, 79  
*Munnetra Sangam*, 96  
*Musali Patram*, 106  
 Mutiettu, 56  
 Muttukumaraswami, 86, 87, 88, 99, 101  
 Muttuswami N., 100  
 Mysore Kings, 39  
  
*Nade*, 50  
*Nagaradhane*, 42  
  
 Nairs, 56, 58, 60, 62  
 Nair Appu Kuttan D., 56, 59, 60  
 Nair Service Society, 70  
*Nalacharitam*, 64  
 Nallapillai Bharatam, 84, 85  
 Namboodris, 13, 56, 59, 60, 62, 64, 66, 67, 68, 69  
 Namboodri Kaplingattu, 67  
*Nangyar*, 57  
 Narahari Tirtha, 107  
 Narakasura, 64, 67  
 Narasimha, 88  
 Narayana Guru, 70  
 Narayana Teertha, 107  
 Nataraja Ramakrishna, 119  
 Nateshan Tambiran, 91, 95  
 National Culture, 15, 116, 129  
 National Folklore Support Centre, 97  
 Nattuva Mela of *Bhagam Varu*, 111  
 Nattuva Mela, 119, 120  
 P.S.V. Natyasangham, 73  
*Natya Dharmi*, 15  
*Natya Mela*, 111  
*Natya Shastra*, 25, 50  
*Nautanki*, 9  
 Nawab of Golkonda, 106  
*Nayaka*, 50  
 Neocolonialism, 79  
*Netrabhinya*, 57  
*Nirmalyam*, 75  
 North Kanara District, 51  
*Nritta*, 111,113, 119  
  
 Odissi, 104, 117  
 Open air troupes, 29, 52  
 Oral tradition, 29  
 Orientalism, 6, 20, 21  
 Orissa, 22  
 Ott Tullalam, 56  
*Pacha (green)*, 59, 65

- Padma V. 91, 111, 119  
 Padmanabha Tampi, 56  
*Pagati Vesham*, 110  
*Pakarnattam*, 67, 68  
*Panchali Shapatham*, 95  
 Pandavas, 36, 86  
 Pandibettu Venkata Rao, 40  
 Panikker, Ayyappa, 56, 59  
 Panikker, Chitra, 79, 73  
 Panikker, Unniri, 68  
 Pondicherry, 83,85  
 Parabati, Sircar, 83  
 Parsi troupes, 113  
 Parvati, 111  
 P.M.K. Party, 97  
 Pasumartivari Melam, 113  
 Pasumarti Krishnamurthy, 113  
 Patayani, 56  
 Patronage, 4  
*Patta*, 70  
 Pattikantodi Rukmini Menon, 68  
 Paulose K.G. 58  
 People's Arts Club, 70  
 Performative context, 4  
 Peterson V. and Devesh Soneji, 6  
 Peterson Indira, 16  
*Pinoattu*, 83  
 Pisharoti K. R., 61  
 Ponnuravi, 89  
 Portuguse, 60  
 Possessions, 86,88  
 Prabhakar Dance Party, 113  
 Prabhakar Joshi, 37, 41  
*Prahlada Charitam*, 111  
*Prasanga*, 25, 29, 30, 32, 33, 35, 36, 40, 45  
*Pratinayaka*, 34  
 Proto Dravidian Theatre, 7  
 Pratibha Prahlad, 121  
*Praveshika daru*, 108  
*Puranas*, 26, 30  
 Puri Rajika, 16  
*Purvaranga*, 50, 60  
 Raghavan, 98  
 Raghava Nambiar, 47  
 Ragini Devi, 75  
 Raja and Radha Reddy, 120  
 Raja of Kottayam, 64  
 Raja of Kottarakara, 20  
*Rajanartaki*, 111  
 Ramachandran K.V., 23  
 Ramanathan, 8  
 Ramanattan, 64,66,80  
 Ramanujan A.K., 23  
*Ramayana*, 96  
 Ram Gopal, 75, 120  
 Ramunni Menan, 71, 98  
 Rangacharya Adya, 8  
*Rasa- navarasa*, 61, 66, 67  
*Rasikas*, 77  
*Raudra*, 62  
 Ravana, 35, 48  
 Redfield, Robert, 62  
*Revivalism*, 44, 45, 49, 96, 128, 129  
*Ritualism*, 129  
 Roy Bhaskar -116  
*Rudrama Kalapam*, 124  
 Rukmini Devi, Arundel, 71, 115  
 Sadat Hasan, 75  
*Sadir Nach*, 23  
*Sahana*, 47  
*Sahradaya*, 73  
 Saketa Kalavidaru, 47  
*Samana hradaya*, 73  
 Sangeet Natka Academy, 23, 115  
*Sanivaru*, 111  
 Sanskrit, 59, 65  
 Sanskritisation, 24, 25

- Sarabhai, Mallika, 123  
 Sarabhai, Mrunalini, 75  
 Sarangadhara, 110  
 Satyabhama, 108, 118, 120  
 Satyanarayana, 123  
 Satyanaryana Sharma, 113  
 Schechner, Richard, 77  
 Sen Geeti, 19  
*Seven and a half Kattai*, 85  
 Shaji Karun, 75  
*Shokarasa*, 48  
 Shankaracharya, 101  
 Shanta Rao, 75  
*Shastra*, 49, 61, 65  
 Shastry Najagar. G., 50  
 Shatavahanas, 104  
 Shiva, 111, 123  
*Shiva Dhanur Bhagam*, 123  
 Shivarama Karanth, 27, 46  
*Shudra Tapaswini*, 32  
 Shulman David, 12  
 Siddappa, 107  
 Siddhendra Natya Kalakshetra, 116  
 Siddhendra Yogi, 106, 107, 108  
 Singer, Milton, 2, 14, 23, 42, 62  
 Singh Yogendra, 2, 14  
*Silappadikaram*, 56  
 Sircar Manjushri, 13  
 Sita, 124  
*Sita's Daughters*, 123  
 Someshvara, 30  
*Sringara*, 12, 48  
*Srikrishna Parijatham*, 123  
 Srinivas M.N., 24  
*Srinivasa Kalyanam*, 123  
*Sthala, purana*, 30, 31  
 Subbanna K.V., 52  
 Sukumaran Nair M.B., 75  
 Sumati Kaushal, 121  
*Sutradhara*, 108  
 Shabdam, 111  
 Srikakulam, 107  
 Srinath, 109  
 Swapna Sundari, 6, 109, 110, 113, 115, 116, 120, 122  
 Swati Tirunal, 64  
  
*Tadi (Bread)*, 65  
 Tagore, Rabindranath, 116  
*Talamaddale*, 38  
*Tamasha*, 9  
 Tamil Folk Theatre, 94  
*Tamilagam*, 57  
 Tamil Nadu, 83  
 Tampuran Pujaris, 93  
 Tampy, 62  
*Tandava*, 12  
 Tandavakrishna, 116  
*Tarangam*, 12  
 Terukkuttu, 1, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 18, 39, 55-90, 83-103, 127  
 Tent troupes, 28  
 Teyyam, 18, 58  
*Tharavadu*, 69  
 Tipu Sultan, 65, 66  
*Tirunokku*, 68  
 Tiyas, 70  
 Topil Basi, 70  
 Tradition, 6, 62  
 Tulu language, 26  
 Tulu Land, 42  
*Tulunada Siri*, 31, 40, 43  
 Tulu Yakshagana, 31, 38, 39, 40, 41, 43, 44, 46  
  
 Udupi, 9, 29, 38, 107  
 Udy Shankar, 75, 120  
 Udyavara Madhava Acharya, 47  
*Utaiyar Carpenters*, 93  
 Uma Ram Rao, 121

- Unnayi Warier, 64  
 Unnayi Warier Smarka Kalanilayam, 73  
 UNESCO, 58  
*Usha Parinayam*, 111, 113  
 Utram Tirunal, 68
- Vachikabhinaya*, 84, 113, 118  
*Vadyars*, 89  
*Vaishnavite*, 64  
*Vaishnava*, 90  
*Vaishnavism*, 104  
 Vallathol Naryuna Menon, 15, 71, 75, 71  
*Vanaprastham*, 75  
 Vanishree, 120  
 Vannar, 98  
 Vannan Washermen, 93  
*Vanniar agriculturists*, 93  
 Vannair, 101  
 Vanniar Caste, 93  
 Vasudevan, 75  
 Vatsayan, Kapila, 19, 122  
*Vedantam*, 120  
 Vedantam Lakshminarayana Shastri, 114, 117, 119, 115, 121  
 Vedantam Prablada Sharama, 113  
 Vedantam Raghaviah, 113  
 Vedantam Suryanarayana Sarma, 123
- Veerashaivism, 104  
 Veethi Natakam, 111  
 Vijayanagar, 47  
 Vellikoothuraya Bharatam, 85  
 Vempati Chinna Satyam, 117, 121  
 Vempati Pedda Satyam, 120  
 Vempati Paradesi, 114  
 Venkataramana Shastri A.D., 111  
 Venu G., 57, 58  
 Vethathu Thampuran, 67  
*Vidushaka*, 57  
 Villa Puram, 89  
*Vira* (Valorus), 48, 61  
 Visa Appa Rao, 115, 116  
 Vishnu (Rama Krishna), 65  
 Vithala Beladi, 33  
 Vithi Bhagavatham, 111  
 Vyasa, 36
- Yakshagana*, 1, 7, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 18, 21, 23, 25-54, 72, 78, 84, 100, 101, 109, 110, 122, 127  
 Yamini Krishnamurthy, 121, 123  
 Yarrow, Ralph, 18, 20
- Zamorin, 64  
 Zarelli Philip, 6, 12, 60, 66, 67, 71, 73, 77



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